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LION OF MAURYA



INDIA'S EPIC STORYTELLER

ASHOK K. BANKER

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Ashoka: Lion of Maurya

Ashok Banker is the internationally acclaimed author of over 50 published books ranging from non-fiction, mythological retellings, historical and literary fiction to crime, mystery, thrillers, romance, science fiction, fantasy, horror. His hugely successful Ramayana Series is credited with having launched the genre of English-language mythological retellings and influenced an entire generation of authors. Over 3 million copies of his books have been sold in 18 languages, 58 countries, and in ebook editions. As a journalist, he broke front-page news stories for *Times of India* and *Outlook*. As a screenwriter, he created and wrote India's first TV series in English, and co-created and co-wrote Malaysia's first TV series in English, as well as several other hit shows. Born in Mumbai, Ashok is of Irish-Portuguese-Sri Lankan-Indian parentage, and lived in India for over 51 years. He now resides in Los Angeles.

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

This is a work of historical fiction and that word at the end is there for a reason. Even history takes its root from the very sexist phrase 'His Story', which is why most of it inexplicably leaves out all but the male dominant point of view, almost always that of a king or an emperor.

If you're expecting to *really* know what *actually* happened back then, please try a time machine.

If you're looking for an engrossing, enjoyable, fictionalized account of what life in that era was *probably* like based on the known archaeological facts and historical narratives, then read on.

I found Nayanjot Lahiri's *Ashoka In Ancient India* to be the newest, most up-to-date book on the subject; though I read everything I could find, the astonishing truth is that there are very few other recent books on the subject. If you think history is static, like cement, and books published fifty, a hundred, or even two-hundred years ago are still accurate, then you would be mistaken. History and its meta mother, historiography, are like sand dunes, constantly shifting with the winds of time as new archaeological discoveries are unearthed, examined, interpreted, explained and as new points of view jostle for attention on the observer's platform. To see for yourself how little is actually known about Ashoka, and how much is probably myth or legend, accepted as fact, I urge you to read Lahiri's excellent book.

Some of you may have Googled my name and found it associated with a certain television show on a similar subject. While it's true that a television network did approach me some years ago and bought the rights to a Story I had written at the time, that Story was never televised. The TV serial they produced was not written by me. (The story, screenplay and dialogue writers of the show were credited on every episode.) My name was credited with the 'Concept' of the show, whatever that means, but it's a matter of record that I never wrote a single script for the show during its production.

As for the TV show itself, I won't waste time commenting on its merits or demerits except to say this...

Sadly, all the so-called 'historicals' or 'mythos' produced for the small and big screen in our country so far have been the ones we desired, not the

ones we truly deserved. India still awaits the production of a genuinely good historical film or television series on the subject of Ashoka and the Mauryavansh empire. Hopefully, some qualified film maker will take up that challenge someday.

Meanwhile, there's the book in hand.

Be assured that it has nothing in common with that TV show except for the fact that it's also a story about the same historical personage. (This is most definitely NOT the story the TV network bought and mangled beyond recognition.)

This book, and its sequels, relay the version of Ashoka I thought would be interesting to tell, based on the known historical and archaeological facts, but with necessary dramatization to fill in the many blanks—and in Ashoka's case, there are many more blanks than there are facts.

Go on, turn the page, and see for yourself if it measures up.

But above all, have fun.

Happy Reading!

ONE

She rose from the left bank of the Ganga like a gigantic lioness guarding her pride. Her high walls towered above the Uttarapatha, the great Northern Road that connected the capital of the Maurya Empire to its northernmost satrapy, Taxila. From the dusty road below, a winding line of visitors craned their necks to peer up at the greatest city in the known world. The fortified palisade spanned a length of fourteen kilometers and a width of two and a half kilometers, occupying an area of two thousand two hundred hectares: ten times the size of Vidisha, forty times the size of Taxila. Capital of the Mauryan empire, home to a hundred thousand souls, pride of the sub-continent of Jambudwipa. There were many great cities but only one Pataliputra.

The formidable outer wall, towering almost five metres above the awe-struck travellers, was constructed from the wood of the oldest sal forests, timber so dense and indestructible that carpenters called it ironwood. In truth, it was more durable than iron, because the damp sub-soil of the Ganga's bank corroded any metal within weeks, while the fortifications of Pataliputra could withstand floods, sieges, fire, invasions, elephant rams, and still stand tall for the next two thousand years.

Inside this intimidating outer wall was a second defensive wall of the same height and thickness. Both walls had slots through which defenders could fire arrows, plunge spears, or thrust swords. A few artfully concealed sally ports provided egress during a siege. Ramparts provided platforms for defenders to make a stand. Between these two formidable walls, the ground appeared to be bare earth, but beneath the yard-high piled soil was a floor of timber planks concealing an underground tunnel bristling with the stuff of nightmares: horrific, flesh-rending, bone-shattering defensive traps and contrivances. Pity the enemies who succeeding in climbing over or under the first wall, thinking they had breached the fortress, only to die horrible deaths without ever setting foot in the city.

City? This was no city! Taxila, Vidisha, Ujjain, Champa, Chamunda, those were cities. Pataliputra was a metropolis. A great sprawling fortress of humanity teeming with as much life as the river that ran beside her. In her winding streets and high-stacked houses, the business of life was

waged on a war footing: art, trade, commerce, politics, sex, music, suffering, poverty, wealth and sewage battled constantly for her citizens' attention. Smoke from a thousand cookfires rose sleepily into the misty autumn morning, carrying the aromas of cuisines from across Jambudwipa and the world. The stores in the great bazaar sold everything from ornate amphoras filled with sweet Greek wine to delicately lacquered fans from the far east. Poets from Lesbos entwined openly in the streets, their golden hair and fair-skinned nudity a familiar sight in this confluence of races, religions, nationalities and dialects. Scholars argued about philosophy, politics, medicine, astronomy and the odds-on favourite for that day's wrestling bout. Fortunes exchanged hands daily in the coin of the realm: beautifully minted and milled disks stamped with the lion sigil and battered profile of the late Chandragupta Maurya, founder of the Maurya Empire, or, occasionally, the hook-nosed likeness of his son Bindusara, the currently reigning Emperor. There was an apocryphal saying that there was more gold to be found in a Patliputra merchant's arse-crack than in the vaults of any other city. Above the vast fields reserved for visitors, gaily-coloured banners and sigils of hundreds of noble houses from around the world waved in the morning breeze from the river. Prostitutes of all hues, shapes and sexes emerged bleary-eyed from the luxurious pavilions of the richer visitors, making their way back to the far less glamorous slums of the lower east side.

Momentarily dazzled by this rich pageantry of colour, smell and sound, the leader of the Lichchavi assassins paused at the gates. A merchant impatient to get off the road grumbled aloud until she motioned to him to go around; he glared at her from the seat of his mule as he trundled by, passing a lewd comment pertaining to her sex and her profession. Kaavala ignored him. As a woman warrior, she had heard worse insults, usually from male warriors who resented the superiority of women in combat. The merchant had assumed she was a dancer because she was dressed as one. Good. It told her that her disguise was effective.

She admired the battlements and fortifications of the Maurya capital while the endless line of visitors streamed past her, noting as many details as possible while playing the part of an innocent country girl come to the big city for the first time. Part of her mission was to observe and gather information, and first impressions were invaluable. She noted the dimensions of the walls, the number of sentries, their placement, and a hundred other details that would be of great use when planning a siege or assault on the city.

Her survey completed, she rejoined the throng entering the city gates,

shuffling forward a step or two at a time until it was her turn to be examined by the gatewatch.

‘Name, tribe, age, occupation and purpose of visit?’ The muscular guard towered above her by at least half a dozen handsbreadth. Back home in the Confederacy, Kaavala was considered tall for a woman, and as tall as most Confederate men. This lout was a big one. Through discreetly lowered lashes, she gave him a quick appraisal, noting how and where she would strike if he were a target. She was confident she could take him down. He looked tough and seasoned but then so was she. She had dropped bigger.

‘Kaavala of Kaavala tribe, 26, wandering dancer, passing through.’

He looked her over quickly, searched her with impersonal efficiency, and let her through. She walked through the vaulting wooden gates, surprised at how easy it had been. Could she have smuggled in her blades after all? She thought not. They had let her in this easily because she was unarmed and seemingly harmless. Even her taut sinewy body and muscular thighs were in keeping with her claim of being a dancer. Had they found a single blade or any other object of suspicion upon her person, she would have been on her way to Palace of Pain by now.

The presence of red-liveried guards reduced as she passed through the gloomy passageway between the walls. She noted the lack of illumination, no doubt designed to keep prospective intruders literally in the dark. She emerged from the gloom into bright gaudy daylight, and was assaulted by noise levels that rivalled a screaming brawl at the most boisterous Confederacy public house. She slowed to a stroll, taking it all in, playing the part of a wide-eyed visitor dazzled by the sights of the big city but she was really looking for her accomplices.

The plan called for them to travel the Uttarapatha and enter the city in small units or groups, posing as individuals, couples, families visiting Pataliputra for purposes of trade or entertainment: Dancers, jugglers, bards, honey merchants, timber agents, elephant mahouts, all relatively low-key professions that were unlikely to arouse the suspicions of the king’s Guard.

She wandered the bustling streets for several hours, disgusted and more than a little envious of the sheer mass of humanity thronging the markets, shops, vending carts and places of business. She glanced down at a merchant’s money box as he concluded a deal and spotted the coinage of every major kingdom she could recognize and then some. How much money changed hands here each day? A king’s ransom, or enough to ransom several kings. No wonder Lichchavi, the central city of the Confederacy, had all but fallen off the trade map. Ever since the

Confederacy had refused to join the Maurya Empire and initiated its campaign of armed resistance, fewer and fewer travellers visited it each year. Everyone was here in Pataliputra, spending their money! Her own father, a merchant from a long line of traders, had been one of the fiercest supporters of the Confederacy, but of late even he had begun to suggest that perhaps a compromise of some sort could be reached, if only to boost trade.

The truth was, the Lichchavi Confederacy was dying economically. They needed Maurya trade and goods to survive. Pride had cost them. But Kaavala was no economist or politician. She was an assassin, and she was here on orders from the Confederacy. Now that she was actually here in Pataliputra, breathing its prosperous air, she wondered how assassinating the leader of the world's largest Empire would benefit her nation. Wouldn't it bring the might and power of Maurya down on the Confederacy with crushing speed? Thus far, they had been permitted to survive only because Pataliputra considered them too insignificant. Once she and her band of trusty knives completed this mission, that would instantly change. But she had done this often enough to know that the whole point of assassination was to change the status quo, shake up the political balance. She assumed that the Confederacy expected Emperor Bindusara's murder to benefit Lichchavi substantially. That was evident from the price they were paying her to accomplish her task.

Over the course of the next several days, Kaavala made contact with all but two of her accomplices. There were a considerable number, almost three hundred in all, which probably made this an incursion rather than an assassination. But the assassination was the main task. The others were only there to provide a foot-in-the-door for the larger Lichchavi force that would enter Pataliputra once it was plunged into chaos and anarchy. Her team's task was to assassinate Bindusara and keep the doors open for the others to follow afterwards. She focussed on the minutiae of her plan and set about preparing to execute it. Despite her distaste at the ostentatious spending, consumption, wealth and decadence on display all around, she focussed on the job at hand.

She was very good at what she did, and this was the most historic assassination ever planned in the civilized world. She liked the idea of being well paid and famous for committing the boldest assassination ever attempted.

Bringing these Maurya greedy rich fat fools down? That was a bonus. Her team had assembled in segments as per the plan, dividing up their mission into stages and teams handling different aspects. They had also

searched discretely for the two missing members but after several days, she had made the decision to proceed without them. She guessed they had found trouble on the road here or it had found them. Either way, two assassins less would make no difference. Or so she thought at the time.

She was wrong.

TWO

Ashoka stepped out into the akhada and the crowd roared with laughter.

The akhada had a capacity of five hundred but there were almost twice that many packed in today. Unlike the more ostentatious arena of the Upper City, this Lower City fighting ground was a glorified pit in the ground with stone steps that served as seats. Here, there was no one from the imperial family to preside over the duels, no imperial guards to keep crowds in check, no rules and thus nobody to enforce them. Only fistfuls and bagfuls of coin to be gambled, fortunes won and lost on fights, unrestrained combat between anyone who dared to enter the pits, no restrictions on weapons, fighting styles or the mayhem inflicted. Fight to death, show mercy, or maim your opponent, the choice was yours. Listen to the crowd, pander to them, or not give a damn. All power lay in the hands of the fighter who won. Losers lost more than a fight: limbs, eyes, organs, lives, it was all part of the entertainment. The crowd lapped it all up, ate and drank and even fornicated while enjoying the entertainment. Fights were common in the stands: gamblers losing their temper along with their fortunes, winners losing their stash along with their lives.

Into this savage, brutal pit of barbarism, Ashoka stepped. The laughter that greeted him came as no surprise. He knew how he must look to these raucous viewers. Slender of body, short in stature, young enough to have only a light cropping of facial hair, he resembled the young prostitutes seated on the laps of many of the patrons in the stands. One corpulent watcher wealthy enough to have personal bodyguards yelled a lewd invitation down, and the crowd roared again. This young stripling of a boy? Fight in the pits? He was a visual joke to them.

And here were his opponents, stepping out into the pit. Two hulking powerfully muscled grown men, each at least a head taller than Ashoka. They flexed their muscles, rolling their massive shoulders, stretching out their arms, squatting on thighs the size of sal saplings. Either one of them looked like he could pick up Ashoka in one hand and break him like a dry stick. Both together? It was absurd to even contemplate. No wonder the crowd was going wild, betting in a frenzy, eager to make back some of the coin lost on the last bout where one odds-on favourite had beaten another in a close finish, but both fighters had ended up dead, nullifying the odds

and leaving only the pit keepers richer. These people wanted blood, but more than that, they wanted blood money, and they smelled it in this fight. The odds were good and the chances of a big payout considerable.

Ashoka did some stretching of his own, limbering up. This drew some more laughter from the crowd and lewd suggestions from his corpulent admirer that his slender body would be of more use on his lap than in the pit. Someone threw down a half-eaten leg of mutton, shouting to Ashoka he needed to eat that and the rest of the goat before he fought! Finally, the catcalling and laughter died down as the pit keepers waved the flags that indicated the start of the fight.

The pit was a rectangular clearing fifteen yards in length by five yards in width, with smooth straight walls that rose five yards straight up, then tapered to sloping terraced levels of rough stone. The ground of the pit was loamy Ganga mud, stamped down by elephants each day but still soft and damp enough to cushion fighters from falls and throws. There were fresh stains and patches, mostly blood but also other bodily fluids and substances from the two dead fighters who had been dragged out only moments before Ashoka entered the pit. One patch looked wet enough to slip on, he noted. Best avoided. There were a variety of weapons arrayed on the pit walls, hanging from or racked upon rusty nails. Ashoka had scanned them already and had chosen his weapons of choice.

He took them down now.

The matched pair of curved daggers felt well balanced. He hefted them, twirling each one in turn to accustom his fingers to the feel. Their blades were about eight inches long, curving sharply. He held them backhanded with the points aimed outwards, and worked his way through a few kathas.

His opponents had armed themselves meanwhile. The bearded one with the wild hair had chosen a mace that looked as heavy as an elephant's foot and was stained with blood, gristle, bone fragments and hair from the many victims it had claimed in the pits. He hefted it with both hands, his massive shoulder and back muscles rippling like snakes under his skin. The other man, the one with the drooping oiled moustaches and the neatly groomed hair, had selected a spear for one hand, and a stabbing sword for the other. He worked both together, spinning around in place, arms whirling as he controlled the unequal lengths with impressive skill. The crowd shouted its approval. 'Crack the boy's bones open and scoop out that tasty young marrow!' someone shouted, and the majority of the audience slapped their thighs in applause.

The two fighters stepped towards Ashoka.

Ashoka stepped away from the wall, holding his daggers in the same

casual backhanded stance, knees bent, legs taut and ready.

There was more at stake here than his life. He had challenged these two strangers to this fight in the pits for a reason that had nothing to do with gambling or providing an afternoon's entertainment to this rabble.

He had overheard the men, whom he believed to be Confederacy assassins, in a public house near the pits, talking about their plans. He liked to spend time in the public houses for just this reason: you never knew what you might hear. That conversation had led him to pick a quarrel by deliberately spilling his wine into the strangers' laps—the stains were still there on their crotches—and when they rose to their feet with outrage, he had challenged them to face him in the pits. They had agreed without a second thought, and that was how they had ended up here and now.

Ashoka had fought in the pits only a few times before. It was something he did incognito, neither the skeptical pit keepers nor the other fighters ever realizing who he really was. That was the whole point: to fight real fights, experience the thrill and danger of battle, with no guru yelling cautions or opponents who hesitated to hurt you because you were a prince of Mauryavansh, son of the emperor himself. His wins on those earlier occasions had convinced the pit keepers to allow him in, that and the fact that they could earn a substantial profit because every one was almost certain to bet heavily against him. But he had never faced two opponents at once before, and both trained assassins. Pit fighters were mostly tough, battered gladiators, young brutish men who drank too much, had lost most of their teeth and were covered with scars. These two Lichchavis were younger, fresher, better fed and trained, and masters of the art of killing.

It promised to be quite a challenge!

Ashoka took another step forward, raising his hands to point each of his daggers at his opponents. He held the pose for a moment, making his challenge and threat clear. The Lichchavis grinned at each other, wiggling their eyebrows to say, This Boy! He thinks he can challenge us and live! The watching crowd laughed and slapped their thighs again, enjoying the boy fighter's spunk in the face of certain death. A few gamblers put down more coin, this time on the boy fighter, on the off chance that the attitude reflected some real fighting spirit.

The assassins moved in perfect concert, habituated to fighting together. They placed themselves near the walls on the longer sides of the pit, moving steadily toward Ashoka, effectively pushing him back towards the short wall at his end. Their strategy was clear: Push him to the wall, strike and finish him. They expected to end this within moments. And from the gleam in their eyes, they intended to kill him before he had chance to draw

breath enough to scream.

The crowd was eating, drinking, laughing, waiting for this obviously one-sided fight to be over so they could see some real duels. Most of them were already bored, feeling there was nothing to be seen here. Only the pit bosses were watching with the sharpness born of a lifetime of watching fighters beat the odds.

Ashoka backed away, pretending to play into the Lichchavis's strategy, till he felt his back bump the wall behind him. He even let his arms droop by his sides, as if giving up in the face of such impossible odds. Then, without any indication or warning, he made his move.

He leaped up a yard in the air, kicked the wall at his back with both feet, one foot about a foot higher than the other, shoving himself upwards and towards his two opponents. He somersaulted through the air, passing over their heads—and more importantly, over their weapons. The Lichchavi with the mace tried to raise it but the weapon was too heavy and too cumbersome to lift higher than his shoulders. The one with the spear had an advantage and took it, raising his spear with deadly speed, seeking to impale Ashoka on the point, like a bug on a needle.

Ashoka was already tilting to the right, the result of kicking himself out with feet raised at different heights, spinning himself diagonally while somersaulting over their heads. This brought his right hand low enough to reach the bearded one's neck with his dagger. A single stab into the thick neck, the curved blade passing through one side and popping out the other, blood and gristle spattering freely. He left the blade imbedded: it would no longer be required.

The moustached one's spear point shot towards Ashoka's belly at the same instant, missing it by an inch because of the unexpected diagonal spin on his somersault. Ashoka used the force expended by the stabbing of the other man's throat to spin himself further, turning his back to the rising spear, turning all the way round, grabbing it with his free right hand, yanking it out of the moustached Lichchavi's grasp because of the sheer momentum of his somersault.

He landed on his feet, the spear in his right hand, the other dagger still in his left, behind the two assassins and facing away from them. He was moving the instant he landed, spinning around like the dervish bedouin fighters he had seen fighting in these same pits from time to time. The Lichchavi with the mace had dropped the heavy weapon, both hands grasping at the dagger stuck in his neck. Blood flew from his stuck throat, and from his open mouth, his eyes bulging as he tried to pull the dagger free and hesitated. Ashoka knew what was going through his assassin's

mind at that moment: The dagger was the only thing helping keep his wounds partially closed. If he pulled the dagger out, his ruined throat would spew out all his heart's blood, ensuring death within moments. He fell heavily to his knees, choking, coughing up blood, trying to solve the unsolvable dilemma.

His companion had been knocked off balance by the spear thrust and the taking of that spear by Ashoka. He had lost his footing momentarily, spun in place to regain it, and was attacking already, the sword slashing through the air towards Ashoka. His movements were lithe for such a large man, his coordination perfect, his technique flawless. And predictable.

Ashoka danced under the slashing sword, feeling the blade slice the air—and a hair or two from his head—above him. He slid across the soft soil on his heels, slashing the dagger backhanded once, twice, thrice, then ripping upwards once.

He rolled away, landing back by the wall where he had been moments ago, leaping up to his feet.

The Lichchavi fighter stood still for a moment, facing away from where Ashoka was now. His sword completed its slashing arc and slowed to a stop.

He looked down at his torso, at the four crisscrossing cuts Ashoka had dealt him with the dagger's edge. As he stared down, the four cuts split open his belly, releasing the wet bilious mass of his guts and internal organs. Blood poured out copiously from the gaping wound: Ashoka's fourth and final thrust had been upwards beneath the rib cage, the long probing point of the dagger seeking and finding the man's heart and puncturing it.

The assassin fell forward, dead before he reached the ground.

Ashoka knelt down over the other fighter, who was still grasping at the dagger in his throat with both hands, trying to stem the outrush of his life's blood and failing. His bulging eyes and gasping bloody emissions showed how close he was to his own death.

He looked up in astonishment at the young, almost hairless face of Ashoka. He looked like he wanted to ask Ashoka a number of important, pressing questions. They were the same questions every man asked when he realized he was dying: How? Why? Is it true?

Ashoka said a single word to him: 'Lichchavi.'

The man's eyes reacted.

That was all Ashoka needed to know. He had already heard the crucial details of the assassination plot itself. All he had needed to confirm was the identity of the assassins. He had that now. The man was indeed a

Lichchavi Confederacy citizen or he would not have reacted as he just had.

Ashoka pulled the dagger from the man's throat. It tore more coming out than it had ruined going in. The assassin collapsed in a puddle of pumping blood and gasping death, then lay still.

Ashoka rose to his feet, raising the bloodied daggers above his head. He turned around, showing himself to the crowd. They were dead silent, as they had been for the past several seconds. The entire fight had lasted less than ten breaths for Ashoka. To some of the watchers, it must have seemed like much less. Many were still gaping, staring, frowning, bug-eyed, unable to figure out how it could have ended so quickly, or produced this unexpected outcome.

Ashoka dropped both daggers to the ground, and walked away, into the dark tunnels that led away from the pits. His work here was done for today.

THREE

The emperor's palace sprawled high above the city, looking down its terraced nose at the rabble and babble. The tallest structure in all Pataliputra, it rested with imperial languor on its elevated platforms, built from the same 'ironwood' as the city walls. Its ornately carved towers, turrets and ramparts gazed with disinterest upon the people whose taxes paid for its construction. The closer one came to the palace itself, the less one saw of it. By the time you stood immediately below it, all that was visible at eye level was a thicket of wooden pillars, each carved from a single sal trunk.

Somewhere within this forest of pillars was C garrison, a wooden building hidden within the foundations of the imperial palace. This structure was ingeniously designed to blend in with the forest of pillars, and was a small fortress in its own right, with its own defensive walls, barracks, fresh food and water. Any intruder or assassin attempting to invade the imperial palace would have to contend with its eight hundred and eighty residents, the Chandikas. The odds that even a small army of invaders would make it past them were far greater than eight hundred and eighty to one.

Above the forest of ironwood pilings rose a succession of terraced levels that artfully concealed the royal apartments from the ground below. There was no natural elevation here. The hill on which the palace stood had been created by bringing in thousands of elephant cartloads of soil, then building an elaborate and intricate structure above it. To reach the uppermost levels, one had to climb up through a maze of staircases and passages, all manned with sentries in recessed guard stands at irregular intervals. Staircases ended in mid-air without warning, passages in cul de sacs, or narrowed abruptly to allow only a single person to pass through at a time. Even if you knew the correct way, you would eventually emerge into a large open courtyard surrounded by verandahs manned constantly by armed archers and spear throwers. And if by some extraordinary feat, you found your way into the royal apartments themselves, you would still have to contend with the Chandikas.

The Chandikas were democratically chosen from all the 500 tribes that had merged together to form the Mauryavansh Empire, by a double-blind

system that ensured that even those making the final selection could not be certain which of their shortlisted choices would be promoted to the cadre. Once assigned to the Chandikas, a warrior had only one purpose in her life: To serve and protect the Emperor. Like most other Maurya traditions, it was the brainchild of Kautilya, Guru to the first Emperor Chandragupta Maurya, co-founder of the empire, and the world's greatest military and political mind.

The practice had begun during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya, when the Mauryavansh empire had still been in the throes of bloody insurrection and strife. Five hundred warring tribes made for a deadly alliance. Assassination attempts were as routine as breakfast. Kautilya, who had been the prime minister at the time, had wanted female soldiers for the royal guard because almost all the tribes were patriarchal and chauvinist in the extreme. Women were not considered worthy of inclusion in power decisions, leave alone privy to plans and schemes. Who better to recruit to defend against the crude assassination attempts of those barbaric rustic tribes than their own women? Weathered and seasoned by the abuse of their own men, disenfranchised from the line of succession, relegated to serving, cleaning, cooking, child-bearing and sex-providing, the women leaped eagerly at the opportunity, any opportunity to further their fortunes. The first recruits had been raw and untrained, many had died, incurring greater violence as retaliation for stepping out of the domestic circle, by their own uncles, fathers, brothers, sons—but very quickly, they had hardened like Deccan clay into formidable warriors, incorruptible, unyielding, and willing to go to suicidal lengths to protect their liege. In time, the assassination attempts had dwindled as even the most boorish tribesmen lost their stomach for killing—and more often, being killed by—women. Today, three quarters of a century later, the women's guard was a feared and hated force in the empire. There were women soldiers in the entire Maurya army, serving in all capacities and at all levels of command. But of all Maurya military cadre, male or female, the Chandikas were the most reviled and dreaded, the famed 'worst of the worst'. It was a reputation they had worked hard to earn and they owned it with pride, refusing to mingle with any other military cadre and, rumour had it, turning only to one another for lovers and spouses.

The outrage caused by the formation of this all-female force, especially to the chauvinistic, patriarchal, and extremely powerful brahmin caucus had been foreseen (like most everything else) by Kautilya who introduced an Oath for the cadre that forbade them from marrying, bearing children, or retaining any family property, name or affiliation. In essence, when a

woman was appointed to the Chandikas, she lost all rights, except the right to serve the Emperor until her death. The Chandikas accepted this too with pride and grace. The prestige and honour of being a Chandika far outweighed the outrage of jealous priests. By creating a women-only cadre fiercely loyal only to one another and their liege, Kautilya had ensured that the brutal political game-playing of the brahmin priests and kshatriya chiefs would not affect the emperor's and his family's personal safety. This lack of control infuriated the brahmins as well as the chiefs, for whom the right to plot assassinations and coups was an essential strategic weapon. The Chandikas had not only served their first master, Chandragupta Maurya, with great distinction, but on his command, they had also exceeded their range of duties to defend the city itself against a brutal coup attempt. Since his son Bindusara's accession, they had not had as much cause to display their considerable skills, but the lack of exercise had not blunted their edge. The Chandikas operated like a tribe unto themselves, using gruelling time-honoured tribal methods to keep their members sharply honed and deserving of their reputation.

One such method was the Blooding, the ritual ceremony being conducted this morning in C Garrison. Six hundred and sixty Chandikas crowded the ramparts which overlooked the rectangular central courtyard of the hidden fortress. As per protocol set down by Kautilya over half a century ago, the Chandikas worked in four equal shifts of six hours each day. At any given time, there were two hundred and twenty on duty, posted at various points throughout the palace. Due to the rigour with which they had to discharge their duties and the need for absolute alertness, peak physical fitness and efficiency, the master statesman had decreed that four short shifts of six hours would ensure that each Chandika on duty would remain fresh and strong. Naturally, all Chandikas remained in a constant state of standby, ready to serve at a moment's notice. But the long hours of downtime left the women with a considerable amount of free time and they used it to train, strengthen and improve themselves constantly.

The Blooding was one of the most effective if brutal ways they accomplished these goals.

Like the deafening cacophony of the marketplace which Kaavala had walked through, the silence within C Garrison was deafening too, relieved only by a snick-snick sound that recurred at irregular intervals.

Six hundred and sixty lean, angular faces watched with falcon eyes from the ramparts as two women danced in the courtyard below.

The two women swivelled, swirled, pirouetted and somersaulted, all the

while wielding gleaming black weapons the length of a sword but with bone-knife blades sharp and thin enough to separate individual layers of gristle and muscle from bone in a single move. Both were specimens of Chandika training, bodies lean muscled, supple and impressively strong. Trained and groomed since early childhood for the cadre, they were finely honed instruments of warcraft, each a master warrior. To the unfamiliar eye, one woman appeared much bigger, taller and stronger than the other. It looked like an unequal match. This was deceptive. Chandikas trained to fight men, who were taller, stronger, faster and bigger. Part of that training to fight men came from pitting smaller built Chandikas against bigger women, especially during trials like the Blooding. The smaller woman was the one undergoing the trial, the larger one the veteran randomly selected as her opponent.

The large woman moved with exceptional grace, belying her bulk by flipping through a series of sideways somersaults that carried her around at an unpredictable angle to bring her to her opponent's left flank, all the while slashing and slicing with the two lethal blades. The ebony blades blurred and whickered as they sought flesh, but the flesh they sought to separate from its owner was always a hair's breadth out of their arcs. The smaller woman whirled and somersaulted as well, incredibly managing to find a rhythm and pattern that was congruent with her opponent's moves. The result was a deadly but breathtakingly beautiful dance, the snick-snick of the flashing blades and the thumps of bare feet landing on oakwood floors the only sounds.

The dance would have continued until one or the other drew blood—hence the name of the trial—but before that consummation could be achieved, the sound of two palms being brought together produced a trio of sharp explosions of sound.

Three claps, indicating Cease!

Completing their in-progress somersaults, both opponents crouched low on the wooden floor of the courtyard, points of their black swords lowered in the submissive katha.

The rest of the six hundred and sixty women watching them turned their gaze to look at the person who had clapped and interrupted the trial. Though no irritation showed in their eyes, they were all disappointed at the intrusion. The Blooding was a sacred ritual to Chandikas and this particular trial was a special occasion. The smaller woman of the two fighters was none other than Chaand, the grand daughter of the original Chandika herself, the founder of the cadre, whose extraordinary bravery and sacrifice in the performance of her duties to Chandragupta Maurya

almost fifty years ago had earned the cadre its name. It was only the second time in half a century that a Chandika had taken part in the ritual and every one of those watching had been eager to see if the third generation lived up to her name. Everyone sought out the source of the interruption, irritated but curious to know what crisis was responsible.

A small figure stood in the courtyard, beside the doorway through which it had entered the garrison. The figure wore a threadbare burlap robe with a hood. From the looks of the garment and the dirt-caked limbs and face, the person resembled one of the hundreds of mendicants that begged for coins in the city streets, often resorting to pickpocketing, filching and petty burglary to survive. But looks were usually deceptive and every one of the Chandikas knew that this was no ordinary begger. On the contrary, this was one of their own masters, part of the imperial family whom they were oathbound to serve.

Ashoka threw back his hood, showing his grimy face to the garrison. There were fresh spatters of blood on his neck and hands and feet too. It was obvious that it was not his blood. He glanced apologetically at Chaand and her opponent, 'Apologies for interrupting the Bleeding.' His gaze held Chaand's a moment longer than was necessary and what passed between them was more intimate than a polite apology.

He raised his face to the watching Chandikas. 'Apologies to all, but I have urgent news. There are assassins in Pataliputra. And they intend to try to kill my father tonight.'

FOUR

Rani Noor Khorasan was entertaining herself when Orzala came to see her. Today's entertainment featured two of her favourite dancers, both Khorasani of course. Noor's fierce loyalty to fellow Khorasani had less to do with their being superior entertainers—which they decidedly were not—than with her distrust of all non-Khorasani. A life spent surviving repeated invasions, genocide and the brutal deaths of close family members were the causes of that distrust, but it was also a matter of personal identity. Noor Khorasan defined herself by being proudly Khorasani. It was who she was. If she gave that up and accepted the cosmopolitanism of Pataliputra society, she would lose her very identity. What would differentiate her from the dozens of other women who pranced in revealing outfits at every opportunity, hoping to catch the Emperor's eye and be made another queen in his palace? Or the aristocratic women who prided themselves on being 'Mauryavansh' rather than of any specific tribe or culture? What did it even mean to be Mauryavansh? She was queen of the Maurya Empire—a queen, surely, if not the queen—and she was fiercely Khorasani as well. To Noor Khorasan, not only were the two qualities not mutually exclusive, it was wrong to deny one's tribe. If you could be disloyal to your own tribe, then why not your empire? To Noor, being a Queen of Mauryavansh went arm in arm with being Khorasani. Indeed, she felt that it was because she was Khorasani that she had become Queen. After all, the Khorasani legions were among the fiercest warriors in Jambudwipa. By taking a Khorasani queen, Emperor Bindusara had acquired their undying support. Politics meant defining yourself and using what you were to get ahead, not denying it.

Orzala paused to give her queen time to notice her presence. Noor Khorasan was engrossed in the entertainment. The two men performing in the artfully illuminated chamber were quite eye-catching, even Orzala had to admit. Their sculpted almost-naked bodies were perfectly defined, every muscle and tendon standing out under the sheen of oil they had massaged onto one another. They were past the initial dialogue and coy, flirtatious banter, as well as the slow stripping of garments and massaging of each other's bodies. Now they were about to engage in the next stage of the

performance: the mutual exchange of pleasure. As Orzala stood just behind her queen's shoulder, watching, one of the two men, a handsome square-jawed brute with a body any god would die for, peeled off the last remaining garment covering his companion's groin, revealing a muscular vein-lined penis. With a sly smile at the other man, he lowered his head to capture the member in his open mouth and began to pleasure him with convincing enthusiasm.

Noor Khorasan sighed softly at the sight. Orzala felt herself getting aroused. She had been with both of the men, separately as well as together, on more than one occasion, and the sight of them engaged in mutual pleasure evoked her own lust. She wished she could stay and watch—or even join in the performance—but her news was urgent and her Queen needed to hear it at once.

She knelt down on the marble floor and leaned forward to reach her mistress's ear. 'My queen, we must speak.'

Noor Khorasan continued watching the two men for another long moment, giving no indication that she had heard anything. But she rose suddenly to her feet and left the theatrical chamber. Orzala followed her close on her heels.

The queen spun around in her bedchamber, turning to face Orzala. 'Well?'

Except for the touch of colour on her cheekbones, Orzala could not glimpse any other sign of Noor's arousal, but she knew her mistress had to be aroused after that titillating entertainment.

'I have received word from a Chandika, a Khorasani Chandika, that the second prince has unearthed a team of Confederate assassins in the city.'

The piercing Khorasani eyes narrowed, thin lips pursed, and a breath was expelled. Not a lustful sigh, but an angry exhalation.

'How?'

'That is not known to me as yet. Ashoka is in chambers with the Inner Circle as we speak. He interrupted the Blooding of Chaand to deliver the news.'

Queen Khorasan walked away, leaving the chamber.

Orzala followed her outside, to the sprawling balcony that skirted the entire Khorasani apartment, affording her a sweeping view of both the Upper and Lower Cities. Chandikas patrolling the upper ramparts of the palace took note of their presence and kept an eye on them, but they were too far away to hear any words they exchanged.

Noor Khorasan stared down at the rooftops of Pataliputra. The Upper City was partially hidden by the terraced levels of the imperial palace, but

Merchant Plaza and the extravagant mansions and town houses of the city's richest and most powerful could be seen. Beyond them, in successive neighbourhoods of diminishing prosperity, were the rest of Upper City and then all of Lower City, a vast sprawling metropolis of markets and sellers and buyers. Queen Khorasan stared down at the gaudy, colourful panorama as if she hoped to see the object of her dissatisfaction, even though Ashoka was several hundred feet below, in C Garrison, rather than out there. It was a Khorasani trait born of growing up in a land so flat and bare that one could always see one's enemies from a distance. Perhaps one might not be able to do anything about them, as in the case of the Greeks, but one could see them coming. From the flash of fury in Noor Khorasan's beautiful light eyes, Orzala knew that she wished she could see Ashoka right this instant, clearly enough to fly an arrow into his young heart.

'How much does he know?'

'Too much, I fear. He spoke of spotting two of the Lichchavi assassins in the audience at the fighting pits, and overhearing them speak of their plans. It would appear he challenged them to a fight and took them both on in the pits. When they lost—'

'Ashoka fought them in the pits?' Noor showed her disbelief.

'Apparently he does that often, as part of his training. It's the only way he can practise his martial arts with fighters who don't hold back because he's a prince.'

'So he could get killed that way, fighting some brute in the pits?' She looked thoughtful as she said it, as if mulling over the possibilities.

'My queen, Ashoka is a problem for another day. Right now, our entire plan is in danger of unravelling. He beat the information out of the two Lichchavi. He knows about the assassination plot in some detail. He and the Inner Circle are meeting now to devise a plan to prevent the assassination and apprehend the Confederacy assassins.'

'If that is all he knows, it is a rancid mouthful of meat to swallow, but it will not kill us. The question is, does he know who is behind the assassination plot?'

'As of now, he believes it is the Confederacy.'

Queen Khorasan looked at her servant's face. 'But he suspects more?'

'I do not believe so, mistress. If he did, he would have brought the matter directly to his father.'

Khorasan shook her head. 'Would he really? His father and Ashoka have never been on the best of terms. No, if he had any inkling who was really behind the plot, it's not his father but his guru that Ashoka would've

run to.'

'Kautilya.'

Khorasan made a moue of disgust, distorting her attractive features. 'The Old Brahmin would sniff out the truth if he knew.'

'Kautilya is still in his ashram in the deep woods, a full day's ride from Pataliputra. Ashoka has no time to take the news to him. The plot calls for the assassination to be carried out tomorrow.'

Khorasan smiled at that. 'Is that what he believes? So he could not have carried word to Kautilya ... Do you think he sent word?'

'It is impossible to read the wind when it blows away from us, but I do not believe he would trust such news to anyone else. Ashoka is a solitary boy. Nobody even knew he fought in the pits until today when he revealed it himself.'

'True. Even I didn't know of this unprince-like pastime. He is a strange boy, is he not, Orzala?'

'He is a cactus in a field of roses, compared to the other princes, my queen. None of Bindusara's other sons would do anything but drink or whore or feast unless compelled to by the Emperor. Ashoka is a rare creature.'

Khorasan tilted her chin up as she contemplated the distant hills. 'Perhaps it is time he became extinct.'

'Would that be wise, mistress? It may draw attention to you?'

'To me?' Khorasan's shapely mouth slitted in a cruel smile. 'Why would I have any reason to kill the second-prince-in-waiting? I have no sons of my own, hence no claim to the imperial throne.'

Orzala smiled, catching her meaning. 'On the other hand, there are other queens who would benefit from his demise. Most of all, the mothers of sons who are below him in the line of succession. That is a brilliant move, my queen. Kill he whom you have no discernible motive to kill, and you will not be suspected.'

'Also, Sushim.'

Orzala's eyes widened as she considered this addition. 'Of course, because what good would it do to kill the second-in-waiting if the First Prince still lives. Remove both at once, however—'

'This is simple enough,' Khorasan said, cutting her servant off, 'what is more important is the how and when of it. It must be done in such a manner as to seem natural, unplanned, perhaps even an accident.'

Orzala thought for a moment. 'Crown Prince Sushim has a great fondness for killing creatures from the safety of his chariot, surrounded by his attachment of Chandikas.'

Khorasan nodded once. 'A hunting accident, very neat. But the Chandikas?'

'An assassination attempt during a hunting expedition. Followed by a tragic accident. One will draw away the Chandikas, the other will occur during the brief time that the crown princes are out of their sight.'

'Interesting,' Khorasan said, 'we shall discuss this further. In the event the Lichchavi assassination plot fails completely.'

'That is yet to be seen, milady. The plan anticipates discovery and is layered. Even if the primary plot is uncovered, there are contingency plans. The game is not over yet. Some damage will be done. The only question is how much and to whom.'

'Yes,' Khorasan said. 'The game is long and our players many. We have many moves to make before our ambitions come to fruition.'

She turned and placed a hand on Orzala's waist, then lowered it to the servant's groin, cupping her sex. 'Right now, I would have you make up for interrupting my afternoon entertainment.'

Orzala gasped as her queen found the centre of her pleasure and massaged it forcefully. 'I live to serve you my lady. How shall I entertain you?'

'Those two dancers I was watching, you are acquainted with them?'

'Intimately.'

Noor Khorasan leaned close to her servant, nuzzling her ear with her lips as she whispered, 'I would watch them do to you what I intend to do to this empire.'

Orzala moaned softly. 'I live to serve.'

FIVE

‘Make way for the Emperor of Mauryavansh!’

The sound of the Chandikas’s voices travelled through the hallways of the imperial palace. Moving with practised efficiency, the frontiers and outliers scouted ahead to ensure that no potential threat awaited along the emperor’s route, while the tight formation of guards immediately surrounding his person stayed at full alert, weapons drawn and ready. The whole contingent moved at great speed, taking their cue from their liege. Bindusara himself retained the slender frame of his youth. Only his balding pate and lined face betrayed his age. The striking stain-like blemish on his fore scalp marked the distinctive birthmark that had earned him his name. Dotted Forehead. Literally: Bindu-sara.

A brief pause as his guardians halted at the entrance to his destination: the private apartments of his mother, the Dowager Queen Apama. Bindusara waited impatiently till at last the signal was given and they were permitted to enter. He paid no heed to the lavish Grecian architecture and decor of his mother’s apartments, every item imported all the way from her homeland, crafted by the most talented artists and artisans. It was like being in Greece itself, as she often told him, which he always interpreted as her way of saying that she wished he could be there, instead of here in this monsoon-plagued land. But to Bindusara, this was the only country he had ever known, and even if he believed his mother and accepted her claim of Grecian superiority in all things, he was still the Emperor of Mauryavansh, not Greece, and if a man’s home was his palace, his palace was most certainly his home.

The flaxen hair of the woman in question gleamed in the brightly lit chamber as he swept in. Apama turned her statuesque body, clad immaculately in a flowing gown, her hair pinned up and brooches in the Hellenic style, her pearls and gemstones gleaming from her hands and her neck. She leaned forward a fraction, permitting her son to show his affection with a trio of air kisses: this side, that side, this side again. Then she indicated the silk-cushioned lounging seats and seated herself with her customary grace. The chamber and she were a perfect match. Had she been a statue placed in the room, she could not have looked more perfectly in place. It was he who felt out of place as he always did, as if their positions

were reversed and she was the Empress and he the one with the decorative title that came with no real power.

The Chandikas took their positions as he sat, blending into the background, ramrod straight but alert.

‘I see you have more than usual,’ she remarked. She meant the guards.

‘There is a threat. An assassination plot. The palace is on alert. Three fourths of the Chandikas have been called to duty.’

She arched an eyebrow, feigning interest. ‘The assassins are still at large?’

‘Not for long. They are being hunted down as we speak.’

She nodded as beautiful, blonde serving-women in togas brought in a succession of refreshments, offering each in turn to both mother and son. ‘I have no doubt they will succeed.’

It was his turn to arch an eyebrow.

She smiled. ‘I meant the Chandikas of course.’

He didn’t smile back. ‘This is no crackpot plot. We have word of an entire company of assassins in the city with an elaborate plan to kill as many and spread as much chaos as possible.’

She sipped her beverage. ‘That is unusual. You were right to seek out my advice. An attempt on that scale means powerful enemies. Do you know as yet who is behind the attempt?’

‘Ashoka says, the Lichchavi Confederacy.’

The first glimmering of interest sparked in Dowager Queen Apama’s blue eyes. ‘Ashoka. Your second eldest. How is that he has this information?’

‘He discovered the plot. He killed two of the assassins himself, after overhearing them discussing their plot.’

‘That is quite strange. Trained assassins on a major operation, discussing their plans for anyone to hear?’

‘Ashoka is not anyone. He has a sharp ear and an even sharper mind. They probably thought they were speaking in private.’

‘Even so, to speak about it at all ...’ She shook her head. ‘I find it difficult to believe that such an elaborate plan was undone by two loose-lipped idiots. It seems too convenient somehow. You were right to bring this to me at once.’

Bindusara sighed with satisfaction. ‘What do you think? Could the information be false? Was it deliberately leaked to confuse us?’

Apama set down her golden cup and thought deeply, staring at the artwork depicting a battle on the banks of the Axios. ‘If it is, you will know soon enough. But Ashoka is blameless in this.’

‘How so?’

‘He brought the information to you. If there is no actual plot, it would reflect badly on him. So whoever may be behind this, he can’t be part of the conspiracy.’

‘But you believe there is a conspiracy?’

‘As Alexander once said to your grandfather Seleucus Nicator, “When there is a throne, there is always a conspiracy”.’

‘That was Greece. This is Jambudwipa.’

‘Thrones are thrones. Ambition is ambition. The colour or race doesn’t change basic human nature. Where there is wealth, there is greed. No, Bindusara, do not make the mistake of underestimating this threat. I am sure your Chandikas will extract every bit of information out of them. But that will only be the information they possess.’

Bindusara blinked. ‘What do you mean?’

Apama adjusted her gown, smoothing out an invisible crease. ‘It is a common strategy of war to give an assassin or spy information that you want to fall into the enemy’s hands.’

Bindusara sat back. ‘Misinformation.’

‘The assassination plot could be a shrewd way to obfuscate the enemy’s real plan.’

‘Which would be ... what?’

‘That is what you must try to uncover. The plot behind the plot.’

Bindusara shook his head. ‘Layers within layers. I hate this doublethink. I wish Kautilya had not retired to the forest. If he was here now, he would know the truth at once. His brilliant mind can analyse anything, no matter how complex or intricate.’

Apama was silent for a long moment. Only the smallest tightening of her lips betrayed her disapproval. ‘You set too much store by that old priest. I never understood why. Your father made the same mistake.’

‘That old priest?’ Bindusara smiled. ‘Mother, it was Kautilya’s ambition and vision that drove father to build this empire. He conceived the administrative system, the sabha, the samiti; every major institution and system of governance was his brainchild. Even the methodology for building roads, bridges, levying taxes, managing states, trade, transport ... Every brick that built this empire, this city, bears Kautilya’s mark upon it. There would be no Mauryavansh without him. There would have been no Chandragupta Maurya. No Pataliputra. We live in the house that Kautilya built.’

The Dowager Queen picked up a savoury that she had no intention of eating. Even at her age, the mother of a middle-aged son bore her years

beautifully. She rode, swam, ran and trained herself in Greek sports with Olympian enthusiasm. She set down the savoury and brushed away imaginary crumbs from her exquisite gown.

‘It is time you knew another side of your legendary mentor. The great ... Chanakya.’ She used the regional name with derision, just as the Chandikas who reported the assassination plot to Bindusara earlier had used the word Lichchavis.

‘The year before you were born, there was an assassination attempt on your father’s life. Much like this Confederacy plot you brought to me today. Unknown number of assassins, unknown forces backing them, unknown motives. The political situation was far more complex back then. The Empire was young, a still uneasy alliance of the five hundred tribes, held together as much by your father’s sword as by clever deal-making and compromises. It was a far cry from the relatively stable Mauryavansh Empire that you rule over today.’

And that difference is largely because of the genius and hard work of my guru Kautilya. He made this possible through his elaborate deal-making and negotiations. My father was a great man but his solution to almost every problem involved raising his sword, just as his approach to parenting involved raising his hand, Bindusara thought these things, but did not say them aloud. He was curious to hear what his mother had to say. He had come to seek her advice and wisdom after all.

‘There were tasters who tasted every item that the imperial family consumed, to protect them against the threat of poison. But when tasters began dying every week, Kautilya told your father and us queens that tasters were not enough. With children in the palace, sooner or later, someone would fall prey to the poison. It was only a matter of time. He wanted to insure us against poison permanently.’

‘How is that possible?’ Bindusara asked, forgetting that Apama did not like to be interrupted while speaking.

‘By taking poison ourselves. A tiny dose of it, consumed daily over a sufficiently long enough period of time, can build up resistance to a fatal dose. This is a method known to us Greeks of course, since ancient times. Chanakya’s idea was sound enough in theory and so I consented to his plan as did your father.’

Again the use of that tribe name, Chanakya.

‘About a year later, your birth mother was pregnant with you. Chanakya had insisted on her taking the poison throughout her pregnancy to protect both herself as well as her unborn child against any assassination attempt. She had reached her final month, the baby due any day. A time when she

was most vulnerable.'

Bindusara waited out the theatrical pause.

'That was when your mother was poisoned by Chanakya himself.'

'What?' Bindusara came to the edge of his seat, staring at his mother in disbelief. 'Kautilya poisoned her?'

'He administered the daily dose himself. A tiny fraction, just sufficient to build resistance, but not enough to cause any harm. Yet that day, he administered a fatal dose. It was his own hand that added the deadly poison. There were witnesses. Daiimaas. Maids. And myself.'

'He poisoned her in front of everyone? That makes no sense.'

'He was administering the daily dose. Nobody expected him to try to kill her by giving her a fatal quantity.'

'But why would he do that?'

'To kill the heir before he was born. To ensure that after Chandragupta's death, which was sure to be soon as your father's health was failing by then, there would be only one person capable of holding the reins of the Mauryavansh Empire. Chanakya himself.'

Bindusara rose to his feet and began pacing the room. 'That is impossible. Everyone would know he had poisoned my mother and killed the heir. He would have been found guilty of treason and executed by law! He would never have lived to enjoy the success of his plan—if it was his plan as you claim.'

Apama remained calm and unruffled. 'I claim nothing. These are indisputable facts I speak of to you.'

'Then why have I never heard this story till today? I am almost forty-seven years of age, why am I hearing about this alleged assassination plot by Kautilya only now?'

'Because we all agreed to suppress the real story and fabricate a narrative that would not endanger the empire's stability. Mauryavansh was at a delicate point then. The brahmin caucus was far, far stronger then than it is now. The five hundred chiefs were still restless at having united to form this nebulous thing called an "empire" which they barely understood or desired. To them, it seemed as if Chandragupta had made himself the Chief of Chiefs and roped them into following in his wake of glory as he taxed their resources to enrich and strengthen himself. Kautilya provided the crucial balance needed to make that alliance work. The chiefs were god-fearing men and women. They feared and respected brahmins just as much as they distrusted other kshatriyas. Kautilya's presence by your father's side ensured their continued support of the five-hundred-tribe alliance which was the foundation of the empire. To discredit or accuse

Chanakya of treason and execute him would be considered sacrilege. The brahmin caucus would rise up and summon down the wrath of the gods upon us all. The only thing a kshatriya fears is a brahmin's curse. What curse might Chanakya himself unleash upon them if they tried to execute him? So we agreed to cover up the truth and tell a different story instead, the story you grew up hearing.'

'That my mother died in childbirth, and that Kautilya was retiring to the forest to work on his great work, the *Arthashastra*.' Bindusara paced energetically. 'I still don't understand it, even if I believe that Kautilya really intended to kill my mother and me, what did he finally achieve by exposing himself in this manner? He is a genius, a mastermind of political maneuvering. Why would he risk everything with such a foolish, transparent mistake?'

'Because he did not expect to be found out by me.'

Bindusara paused in his pacing to stare at Apama. 'By you? But you said there were other witnesses, maids, servants, daiimaas ...'

'None of them mattered. All they saw was Chanakya putting the usual tiny dose into your mother's food. Mine was the only testimony that sealed his fate. I was the only witness that your father believed.'

'And you saw something different? You saw him putting a much larger fatal dose of poison in my mother's food?'

Apama raised her eyes to meet his heated gaze. 'Are you doubting my word?'

Bindusara looked away. 'I believe you, Mother. But how did Kautilya make such a mistake? How did he let you witness him putting in the larger dose? He's a brilliant mind. It wouldn't be like him to make such a clumsy error.'

Apama shook her head. 'He made no mistakes, no error. He poisoned not only your mother's food but mine as well, and the food of every queen that day. He intended to kill us all at the same time, leaving no wives, no heirs, and no future for Mauryavansh.'

'But ...' Bindusara stared. 'Only my mother died that day. You survived, as did my father's other queens.'

'I survived because I saw him poisoning us and stopped the other queens before they could eat. I wish I could have saved your mother as well, but by the time I reached her, it was too late, she was already on the floor of her bedchamber, frothing at the mouth, bleeding from her nether regions, the daiimaas and servants in a state of panic.'

'What happened then? After you saw her lying there bleeding?'

Apama shrugged. 'Chanakya was called in as usual. He examined your

mother and announced that it was too late to save her but you could still be rescued. He cut open your mother and drew you out, blue all over and barely breathing.’ Apama touched her forehead. ‘The stippling of poison on your head is proof of how close you came to death that day.’

Bindusara shook his head, still confused. ‘That part is exactly as I heard it then. Kautilya cut open my mother and saved my life. If as you say it, he poisoned my mother to kill her and me, why did he bother to save me then? Why not simply let me die with my mother?’

Apama shrugged. ‘Games within games, plots within plots. I don’t claim to understand every working of his twisted mind. All I know is what I have told you. Kautilya killed your mother and tried to kill me as well.’

Bindusara was still for a long moment. ‘And then? After that?’

‘As the next queen in line, I took you to my breast, raised you as my own son, and groomed you to be Chandragupta’s heir, preparing you to be the next Emperor of Mauryavansh, which you ascended to within the next two decades.’

Bindusara shook his head slowly. ‘So Kautilya’s plan failed. He was exposed and exiled. I still don’t understand ...’

‘Eventually, yes. It took almost twenty years to extricate him from Maurya politics, to relegate him to the forest where he lives now. Political change happens in stages over time, there is no overnight action as in war. Everything requires time, patience, planning.’

‘And in all that time, before that day, and since, he has never acted against the Empire, against the throne, against this family? It seems incredible.’

Apama sighed. ‘Betrayal always seems unbelievable. Especially when those closest to you turn against you.’

‘But Kautilya? He built Mauryavansh! He made our family what it is today.’

‘That he did,’ Apama admitted reluctantly. ‘And it’s possible that the assassination attempt was a single moment of weakness, a lapse of reason in a long and otherwise illustrious career. As I said, my son, I cannot explain everything to you. I am no mastermind or genius. Merely a daughter of Greece. But I am also the daughter of Seleucus Nicator, the greatest ruler that the civilized world has seen since Alexander, and before. I know one thing: Once a person loyal to you betrays you, even if it is in a moment of weakness, you can never trust that person again. Never.’

Bindusara nodded. ‘That I understand. It is the rest of it I find incredible to believe.’

Apama reached out and touched Bindusara’s shoulder in a tender

gesture.

‘Son, listen to me.’

Bindusara raised his eyes to meet hers.

‘Chanakya is a master of the long game. He invented the art of plotting and counter-plotting moves that would play out and pay off over decades, even centuries! In the game, nothing is as it seems. At times the attacker poses as the victim, or as an ally, or as an enemy of an enemy, and so on over the years, until it becomes impossible to tell who is truly who and what their plan really was at the outset. Only the attackers themselves know. It is like viewing only one moment of a long campaign. At that moment, one army may seem to be retreating, but in fact they may simply be withdrawing to move to a better position later. Who knows how long Chanakya was plotting against our family or what his real plan might have been? All that we know for sure is that he created the system of spasas, the spy network, and the assassin’s guilds, and he set into motion a complicated web of espionage and counter-espionage that even the most brilliant mind could never unravel without knowing the secret code. My father is a master of military history and when he heard about Chanakya’s failed attempt and exposure, he raised many of the same questions and doubts that you did today. But he concluded with one clear response.’

Bindusara waited for her to go on.

‘He said, “Sometimes the best way to destroy your enemy is to pose as his friend”.’

Apama looked at him. ‘Do you follow, son?’

Bindusara nodded slowly. ‘I do but he can’t have meant it, could he?’

‘Why not?’ Apama spoke her final words with authority, determined to eliminate any vestige of doubt left in her son’s mind. ‘Is it not possible to believe that a genius like Chanakya could all along have played the part of being an ally and friend of your father, while in fact secretly using him to get what he wanted: A military leader strong enough to lead the five hundred tribes to victory against the oppressive Nanda Empire. And once he succeeded in that goal, and built the Mauryavansh Empire, Chanakya was merely biding his time until the day when he could eliminate your father and his entire family, and take over the reins of the Empire himself. Consider the weapon he used. Poison. Not a sword or an arrow or a spear. Poison! He is a brahmin after all. A priest cannot take up a weapon, or he would lose the respect of the world forever. But by resorting to poison, under the guise of administering a daily dose to protect the queens, he could eliminate them without aggressive violence, weapons or an army. It took your father forty years and the military strength of five hundred tribes

united to defeat the Nandas and replace their evil empire with his own Mauryavansh. Chanakya could not use any armies, weapons or military tactics. So he used the only means available to him: A slow, long poisoning of your family intended to lead eventually to the extinction of our line. That way, he could remove us but retain the empire.'

Bindusara nodded slowly, believing at last, his doubts removed by Apama's narrative. 'Yes. Yes, I see it now. He would have got away with it too. Blamed the overdose on one of the daiimaas, or maids, or a Chandika even ... The thing that undid him, the only thing, was being seen by you, adding the second, much larger dose of poison.'

Bindusara clasped his mother's hands, the contrast between her ivory complexion and his ebony skin as stark as the difference in their features. But in his eyes was the love of a son for his mother, the woman who had raised him as her own. 'Thank the gods you saw him then. Kautilya ...' he swallowed, then corrected himself, 'Chanakya may have been forced to pretend to save me to avoid being proven guilty of the assassination, but it was really you who saved me that day. You are the reason I am alive today. Why this empire still stands, this dynasty still survives. It is all by your grace, Maa.'

SIX

Kaavala watched calmly as the Chandikas surrounded six of her colleagues at spear point and challenged them to throw down their weapons and surrender. The Lichchavis looked around the market square, seeking ways out. There were several but Kaavala knew at a glance that all of them would end in certain death. These weren't Mauryavansh army cadets, they were Chandikas and this was their home ground. She had no doubt that they had positioned other Chandikas to block off all escape routes before challenging her fellow Confederates. The magical speed with which the public had fled the square itself proved her suspicion: not even a single gawker in sight? That was impossible in a country where the grislier the mishap, the larger the crowd that gathered to view it. This was a well planned and perfectly executed roundup. The Chandikas had been watching these six and had made their move precisely when and where they chose. Which meant that they were onto the Lichchavi conspiracy!

She watched as one of her colleagues, a tall wiry woman named Shastaki who was as famous for having three husbands as for her trademark coup de grace involving the use of a needle-sharp hairpin which she kept in her luxuriant hair, made her move. Shastaki drew the pin and used it to attack the nearest Chandika. Taking a cue from her defiance, the other five Lichchavi also acted, striking out with hands, weapons, feet, or whatever was near.

The fight lasted only a few minutes. It was short but brutal. The Chandikas responded without hesitation, delivering on their threat that resistance would result in execution. Kaavala watched as her colleagues were despatched with savage efficiency. She looked down from the verandah at the prone body of Shastaki lying on the cobblestones thirty feet below. Shastaki's hand was twisted inwards, still gripping the six-inch long pin which now pierced her own ear, her elbow broken with the brute force of the Chandika's retaliation. Her body spasmed and shuddered in its final death throes, blood seeping from her ear as she surrendered her life spirit.

Kaavala bared her teeth in impotent fury. Shastaki was not just a colleague, she was a friend, and among the best in the assassins guild. Her death was a blow to the conspiracy but Kaavala was relieved she had

chosen to fight rather than surrender. Dead assassins could not be made to talk, and right now, all Kaavala could hope for was that Pataliputra was not aware of the full extent of the Lichchavi plan.

She retreated into the apartment, leaving everything exactly as it was, wasting not a moment longer for any reason. She exited not through the front but a rear window, climbing out onto a running ledge and sidling over until she could jump into a balcony in the next building. She heard and saw no signs of pursuit or a trap but did not let her guard down. The certainty with which they had rounded off those six had shaken her. It suggested a traitor amongst her number. She did not want to believe any Lichchavi could betray their own and leak their plan to the Mauryas, but what other explanation was there?

After jumping and climbing across several blocks, she found a terrace that had an overhang that would conceal her from the view of other terraces as well as from the ground below. If they came at her from the stairway, she could leap out to the next rooftop and escape that way. She had no desire to go down to street level. At every turn, she had glimpsed Chandikas out in full force in the streets, moving through the river of commerce and humanity like sharks through shoals of fish. She guessed the rest of her fellow assassins were being rounded up and killed at this very moment. They would be given a chance to surrender but their orders had been clear: No surrender, no retreat. They would all go down resisting, and if the Chandikas didn't finish them off on the spot, they would make sure they drove their blades or pins into their own hearts rather than let themselves fall into enemy hands.

Face it, the conspiracy is finished. The plan is moot. The entire operation is a washout.

Yet a part of her refused to give up.

So long as we breathe, we resist.

So long as we stand, we fight.

The Lichchavi Confederacy motto was intended for times like these, when all hope seemed lost, all avenues closed. She was still alive and free. She was here to do a job, she intended to do it. Better to die trying than to die giving in to fear of failure.

There was a contingency plan provided for such a situation and her orders called for her to follow it.

She hid out all day and the next, waiting for the hue and cry to die down. Finally, when she deemed enough time had passed, she decided to make her move.

Chaand met Ashoka in his apartment at night. He was expecting her.

She came into his arms at once, hungry for his touch. They embraced and kissed but when she began to disrobe, he stopped her.

‘We need to speak first.’

‘You are making a habit of interrupting me!’

He smiled ruefully. ‘I ruined your Blooding, didn’t I?’

She kissed him and slipped a hand down to reach his groin, cupping him. ‘You ruined nothing. You saved the day. You’re a hero to every Chandika, you know that. You did our jobs for us!’

‘That’s saying too much. I learned of a threat to my family. I brought it to you. What else would I have done?’

‘If someone else had been in your place, they might have done other things with that information.’

Ashoka moved towards a bowl of sliced fruit. He tossed a piece to her, she caught it with her mouth. He tossed a piece up and caught it as well. They grinned and ate together. ‘What else would they have done? And who’s the “someone else” you’re talking about?’

She gestured at the walls, indicating the imperial palace all around. ‘Your siblings, for one. You think they would have reported the news of Confederacy assassins to us Chandikas?’

‘What else would they have done? It’s a threat to the family, your task is to protect the family. What other option is there?’

She sat on the bed and leaned back, her slender muscled body stretched out, strong thighs flexing as she lifted her legs onto the bedding. ‘There are always options.’

He thought about it for a moment, then resumed chewing the fruit. ‘You mean they could have let the assassination attempt go on as planned. To eliminate rivals to the line of succession.’

‘He’s not just an ugly face,’ she said, clapping her thigh. ‘He’s a sharp mind too.’

‘That never even occurred to me. I don’t care about the line of succession.’

‘How can you not care? You’re second prince-in-waiting.’

‘I’m not waiting for anything. I have no intention of ever being Emperor.’

She sat up, staring at him. ‘What else would you be?’

‘Free. I don’t want to spend my life tangled in court politics, yelling in the sabha to be heard, deciding which queen to sleep with next and which to impregnate, or not to impregnate, or which kingdom to go to war against when they don’t pay their levies. All that is not for me. I want to be free, like the Vyag of Girvan. Free as a lion.’

‘A lion of Maurya?’ she teased, stretching out one bare foot to nudge his groin with her toes.

‘Why not? I envy the lions. Or any Vyag. They live free, they don’t have any politics. They don’t send assassins to kill each other because they disagree on political theory. They don’t beat and abuse and rape and kill and steal and discriminate. They just live.’

She looked at him intently. He was serious about this. She knew his love for animals and wilderness and dislike of cities and luxury. But she had never realized how entrapped he felt by his privilege and entitlement.

‘Those years you and your mother were in the forest, living that life, it must have been a contrast to the big city, to living in a palace, being a prince of Mauryavansh.’

He sighed. ‘They were the best years of my life. Everything after that seems like a bad dream.’ He gestured at the opulent apartment. ‘A very comfortable, luxurious nightmare. But still a nightmare.’

She moved to the edge of the bed, lowering her voice. ‘You need to be careful not to say such things where you can be heard, Ashoka. This is Pataliputra. Even the corn has ears.’

He smiled at her joke. ‘Why should I care? My mother knows how I feel. She’s the only one that matters to me in this house.’

‘And maybe your brother Tissa and his mother? And your sister Tapasvi?’

He shrugged. ‘Well, just a few people who matter. But everyone else can go jump in the Ganga and drown for all I care.’

‘Said the boy who just saved those very people from the deadliest assassination attempt in fifty years.’

Ashoka leaned forward. ‘That’s different, Chaand. I can’t stand by and let people be murdered. Not my family or anyone else. That’s just basic human nature.’

She smiled at him. ‘So smart a warrior yet so naive a politician. I can name four dozen of your siblings who lack that “basic human nature”. As far as they are concerned, the Confederacy assassins could slaughter everyone else in this palace, so long as they remain alive to claim the throne.’

Ashoka sighed, getting up to look out of the vaulting window cut out of the stone wall. He gazed up at the evening sky outside, filled with the tiny silhouettes of a flock of kraunchya heading back to their habitat before nightfall, their plaintive cries faintly audible. ‘I don’t understand that kind of thinking.’

She came up behind him, pressing her body against his, sliding her hand

across his bare chest. 'I know you don't. That's why I love you and sleep with you, Ashoka. Many Chandika sleep with the imperial family members, and many enjoy it too. But I don't come to your bed just for pleasure or to seek favours. I come because I think you are a breed apart. Who knows, maybe you really are a lion of Girvan. I've seen you fight in the pits. You have more Vyag blood in you than human!'

He caught her hand which was doing tantalizing things at his groin. 'There is something I have to tell you, though.'

'Yes, you said that earlier too when you interrupted me. This time I won't brook interruption. Say it quickly and be done with it. I have to be up again for training in a few hours and I intend to make the most of my free time.'

He caught her hand, sighing at interrupting his own pleasure, and turned to face her. 'Chaand, there is something I must tell you first.'

She caught the seriousness of his tone and frowned. 'What is it, my young lion?'

He sighed again, a heavier sigh this time, weighted with the gravitas of someone who has had too much responsibility thrust upon his shoulders at too young an age. 'There is a spy in your order.'

She stared at him. 'Amongst the Chandikas? Impossible.'

He looked at her silently, neither arguing nor explaining.

She saw the truth in his eyes. 'Devi Chamunda protect us. Honestly?'

He nodded once, slowly, reluctantly.

'How can you be sure?'

'I passed on all the information I had overheard about the Confederacy assassins ... but left out one detail.'

'What?'

He sighed again. 'The two men I heard in the public house. The ones I fought and killed in the pit. I heard them mention a contingency plan in case they were discovered and the conspiracy thwarted.'

'You told us this already. You said you didn't know any more about that contingency plan because they didn't discuss it further.'

'That was true because they didn't know anything about the contingency plan. All they knew was that there was one.'

'So you left nothing out?'

He looked out of the window again. The sky had turned shades darker in the time they had been talking. The plaintive cries of the kraunchya were silent now. Dusk had fallen, drawing down the curtain on another day. 'Just one minor detail. Nothing that would affect the Chandikas foiling the assassination or apprehending the Lichchavis. Just a minor point that was

not relevant to your order at that time.'

She looked at him. 'Ashoka, don't make me beg you. Tell me!'

He turned to look at her again, the faint dusky light behind him throwing his face into shadow, painting his already dusky features the colour of night. 'They didn't know the contingency plan but they mentioned the person who did know it. In the event of any emergency, they were to contact this person who would then tell them, how many ever of them were surviving at the time, how to proceed.'

'And?'

'And this person was someone here, in the imperial palace. In the imperial family.'

She stared at him, not shocked but visibly turning wheels in her head, thinking through the permutations and combinations of this revelation. 'That makes sense. As I said, any of your siblings would be happy to reduce the line of succession, moving himself higher up the line, maybe even to the very top. So they resorted to enlisting a little outside help. Contacted the Lichchavi Confederacy, probably promising to lift the embargo, provide them trade or economic alliances if they did this. The Confederacy is on the verge of starvation, people are killing each other over food over there, they would have jumped at the opportunity. Killing off most or all of the imperial family and being rewarded for it? It would be a dream offer! There's nothing surprising about that. What does that have to do with the Chandikas?'

Ashoka leaned back, raising his knee to rest his foot casually against the stone wall. 'I didn't tell the Chandikas this last part. About the person who hired the assassins being a member of my own family.'

Chaand frowned. 'So?'

'So then why was it that within an hour of my bringing the news to the Chandikas, one of your order went to visit a member of the imperial family, and passed on every detail I had shared?'

Chaand's face faded away. The dusky light from the high slatted windows cast diagonal bars of light into the chamber, dimly illuminating parts and concealing others. She stepped back into a shadowy patch between bars, her face now concealed from Ashoka. 'It could have been for a number of reasons. She could have been assigned to that member of the family.'

'It was not her shift and would not be her shift for another 12 hours. Yet she went, leaving her barracks and violating a direct order forbidding all Chandikas from speaking of the Lichchavi assassins to anyone, including the imperial family.'

‘Even so, it does not mean she went to betray that confidence. She could have spoken of any other matter.’

Ashoka shook his head slowly, sadly. ‘If only she had. But I have it on good authority that she did exactly what she was forbidden to do, and shared the entire story of the assassins to my family member. After which she went directly back to her barracks and continued with her duties, serving her next shift as normal.’

Chaand folded her arms across her chest, her body stiffening and distancing itself from him. ‘How can you be so sure that was what she told your family member?’

‘Because as you said yourself, even the corn has ears in Pataliputra.’

She hissed, releasing a breath. ‘Spasas! Of course. Your precious guru Kautilya left behind a network of spies in every walk of life throughout the empire. Maids, servants, daiimaas, eunuchs, anyone and everyone. But Kautilya is long gone from Pataliputra. His network now reports to the Emperor. Not to you.’

‘I was Kautilya’s most loyal disciple. I still am, in a manner of speaking. He was the one responsible for bringing my mother and me to Pataliputra, for instating her to her rightful position as a queen of Mauryavansh, for ensuring our safety and wellbeing during those difficult early years when everyone in this house was an enemy who wanted us both dead. He still has eyes and ears in here as well as elsewhere. He makes sure even now that I continue to receive information that is relevant to my and my mother’s safety. This assassination falls squarely into that category.’

‘Spies who spy upon spies.’ Chaand shook her head, wondering. ‘Impressive. So you know of a Chandika who is loyal to one of your family and reports matters that may be relevant to that person. How is that different from your old guru’s spies who feed you scraps of information?’

‘Because I don’t pay Lichchavi assassins to come to Pataliputra to wipe out my whole family. That’s a big difference, wouldn’t you say?’

She shrugged. ‘All’s fair in love and politics, as they say. Don’t be so naive, Ashoka. There are always plots and conspiracies afoot. Alliances between enemies and even plots against friends. When snakes assemble in a pit, they won’t hesitate to bite each other. This is Pataliputra. It’s the biggest snake pit in the world.’

‘Maybe I am naive. But I’m no fool. This family member hired those assassins to wipe out as many of the imperial family as possible, kill them all if they could. That includes myself and my mother. Yes, and it includes Tissa, his mother, Tapasvi and her mother, because I do care about them too. Anyone who is part of a conspiracy to kill me and those I care about is

no friend of mine. And definitely not a lover who slept with me because she loves me.'

Chaand shrugged. 'Perhaps she does love you despite that. Perhaps she has no choice but to be politic to survive. And being politic means killing a few friends from time to time. Even lovers. It's nothing personal, Ashoka. We had some wonderful times together. You are a great lover and an extraordinary fighter. But you're a naive, idealistic people-loving, animal-loving fool when it comes to politics and ambition. You don't have the iron in you to take hard steps, to kill when killing's needed, even if it's a friend or family member ... or mother.'

Ashoka sighed. 'A day when I am willing to kill my own mother to further myself politically is a day that will never dawn for me.'

'You would be surprised. Politics and ambition will make a person do anything.'

He nodded. 'I can see that.'

'You see nothing, Ashoka of Pataliputra. You see only goodness and hope in all humanity. You don't see the ugliness and cruelty and pain that lies beneath it all. Nothing comes without pain and suffering.'

'Especially justice.'

Ashoka stepped forward, into the last light of dusk. His hands were bare, but Chaand knew that his hands were themselves weapons. She had come prepared. She drew the shortblade she kept concealed in her lower garments.

He moved so swiftly, she was still speaking when he grasped her arm and shoulder, twisted hard and pressed her own blade into her chest, penetrating between the ribs and into the heart, stopping her life almost instantly.

She collapsed in his arms, like a lover's body turned boneless in the paroxysm of ecstasy. He caught her and lowered her to the bed. He remained bent over her for a moment longer, kissed her forehead, bidding her farewell, then rose and left the chamber without looking back. He left only a single tear on her upraised face, proof of his first love.

SEVEN

‘Father.’

Bindusara looked up, annoyed, ready to reprimand whichever of his sons had the audacity to barge into his chambers unannounced. He had no time or patience to deal with the petulant demands of one of his brood. Whatever princely problems they had, they could take it up with their mothers who would then take it to Dowager Queen Apama in turn. As head of the ‘house’, she would decide how to handle the problem, or even if it was worth handling. He raised his voice, prepared to whiplash whichever upstart one of his hundred sons had dared to intrude on his private time.

‘How many times—’ he began in a thundering tone.

When he saw Ashoka standing with half a dozen Chandikas, he trailed off.

‘What is this? Why are you all here?’

Jugni, a senior Chandika and one of the old guard, stepped forward. ‘My Emperor. There is need for discretion and caution. Send away your personal servants and maids so we may speak freely.’

Bindusara knew Jugni well enough to understand that it must be an emergency of the highest order. He gave the necessary order brusquely, clearing his apartments of the entire contingent of some thirty servants who served him at all hours, day and night.

He glanced at the Chandikas posted to protect him, standing at their usual stations.

‘I assume you don’t mean to send away your own order.’

‘Your Chandikas may remain on duty. The traitor in our ranks has been found and dealt with already by Ashoka.’

Bindusara was taken aback. ‘A traitor in your ranks? You mean a Chandika was involved with this Confederacy assassination plot?’

‘Not with the plot itself, but with those who ordered the assassination. This was a conspiracy, your Excellency, one involving members of your own imperial family.’

Bindusara sat back and regarded her intently. ‘That is a treasonous accusation, Jugni. Punishable with death if found to be false.’

‘I am aware, Excellency. I would not make the allegation if it were not

true. But Ashoka has brought us ironclad proof of this fact. I myself, along with these senior leaders of our order, was privy to a very revealing conversation he had with one of our own only a short while ago. After discussing the implications, we deemed it best to bring the matter directly to you for further consideration.'

Bindusara looked at Jugni, then at Ashoka, and leaned back in his seat. 'Make it brief. I am addressing the sabha shortly in an emergency session to discuss the Confederacy assassination plot and its political implications.'

'This information may be of value to you in that session, Excellency. We believe that someone within the imperial family is directly responsible for the assassination plot and is aiding and abetting the surviving assassins. We also believe that even as we speak, these assassins are either within the precincts of the imperial palace or intend to enter it this very day.'

Bindusara stared at the head of the Chandikas, his eyes and face betraying no reaction. 'These are treasonous allegations, as I have already pointed out. Present your evidence substantiating the claims or face apprehension and immediate execution.'

Jugni nodded once, sharply, her eyes cutting to Ashoka.

He stepped forward. 'Father, one of the Chandikas shared my bed. I got her to confess her loyalty to the Lichchavi Confederation. She admitted that one of us was responsible for the assassination plot and that more assassins remain at large.'

Bindusara regarded Ashoka for a long moment. 'I assume you have this Chandika in custody now?'

'She attacked me. I killed her to defend myself.'

Bindusara continued to stare at Ashoka, as if watching the attempt and its outcome in his son's eyes. 'So the only person who can corroborate your story is dead and we have no way to confirm or deny its veracity?'

Jugni spoke up. 'I heard the entire exchange myself, Excellency. As did Niava, Kashiti, and Sumanya.'

The other three senior Chandikas nodded in agreement. Kashiti spoke for all three. 'We did, Excellency. There is not even a shadow of doubt. Someone from the imperial family masterminded and controlled the Confederacy plot.'

'Who?'

All five were silent.

Bindusara looked at Ashoka. 'You said you extracted a confession from your Chandika lover. What was the name she confessed?'

'She gave no name, Father. Only an admission that it was so.'

Bindusara breathed in slowly and released the breath, his smooth handsome features unaltered. 'So you claim there is a traitor in our own house. Do you know how large our family is, Ashoka?'

'Yes, Father. A hundred queen mothers, a hundred and eighty-seven princes and princesses, three hundred and sixteen close relatives of the queen mothers. In sum, six hundred and four members, not counting daiimaas, maids, and other servants and Chandikas.'

Bindusara frowned. 'Six hundred and three, not four.'

Ashoka hesitated.

Bindusara caught the hesitation and narrowed his eyes. 'Six hundred and four—including me? You would count your own Emperor as a suspect?'

'I was merely offering the complete count, Father. I made no such allegation.'

'They are one and the same thing. Including me in the count is an allegation. A treasonous one! I have executed my own sons for far less!'

He had indeed. Only a few masas earlier, Bindusara had sentenced three of his sons to summary execution for being overhead criticizing their father's favouring of Sushim and Ashoka over them. All the royal heirs were required to watch the execution performed in the imperial courtyard within the palace compound. Ashoka still remembered Jash, Murugu, and Favri each begging for mercy before the executioner's sword fell, severing their heads from their necks.

Ashoka looked his father in the eye without betraying either fear or intimidation. 'It was not meant as such, Father.'

Jugni spoke cautiously. 'Your Excellency, it would be impossible to discuss such a matter without seeming to speak treasonous thoughts. Yet it is not our thoughts or intentions that are treasonous, merely the facts as they appear before us. The prince is only stating these facts.'

Bindusara kept his eyes on Ashoka a moment longer, as if waiting for his son to look down first. Ashoka continued looking at his father, not with insolence or arrogance but with his direct, uninflected gaze. Both pairs of eyes gleamed with burnished copper heat, the similarity between their features ending there.

Ashoka had inherited his father's eyes and his ability to appear deathly calm even in the face of a life-threat. But where the father was strikingly handsome, even regal in his aspect, the son merely looked intense and dangerous. Nobody would have called Ashoka attractive but he exuded a sense of danger when entering any place that made even men twice his size glance sharply at him. His lack of good looks and his hawkish, piercing gaze could easily be mistaken for a threatening stare but in fact it

was simply Ashoka's natural facial expression when thinking deeply or being serious. He couldn't have softened it unless he smiled, which would have been gratuitous in these circumstances.

Finally, Bindusara turned his piercing gaze back to Jugni. 'And is it your intention now to drag all six hundred and four imperial family members to the Pain Palace and interrogate them? Including Ashoka himself and me?'

Jugni looked uncomfortable. 'Excellency, we have no such intention. All we seek is permission to search the imperial palace thoroughly for the assassins and apprehend them before they can make their move.'

Ashoka spoke in the same direct tone, seemingly unaffected by his father having taken umbrage a moment earlier. 'We know every single one of the imperial family members and their approved staff. It will be a simple enough matter to root out the strangers amidst them.'

'So you say. Does it occur to you that if someone in this house is in league with the assassins, they might simply conceal these killers? They are probably providing them sanctuary even as we speak.'

Ashoka shrugged. 'If they're here, we'll find them.'

'How? By tearing apart the palace? By rousting every nursing queen mother or sleeping babe and ripping open every concealed space that may hide an assassin?'

'If need be, yes. We are prepared to do whatever it takes to find these killers and end this threat.'

Bindusara sat back. 'I see.'

Jugni glanced from Ashoka to his father, assessing whether the father-son exchange was over. 'We must act quickly, Excellency. Before the assassins strike. There is a snake in our nursery, and we must root it out before it fastens its fangs onto unsuspecting throats. Will you grant us leave to act?'

Bindusara rose to his feet, striding slowly to the far end of the chamber, hands clasped behind his back. Jugni glanced at the other Chandikas: all four of them exchanged a look of concern. This audience was not going as they had expected. The brief discussion they had held after Ashoka's encounter with Chaand and before they had come to the imperial suite had not anticipated the Emperor challenging them! Already shaken by the discovery of a traitor in their own ranks, the Chandikas were visibly disturbed by this turn of events.

'This Chandika, the one who was in cohorts with the Confederacy ...' Bindusara trailed off, his back still to them as he gazed out of the enormous bow-shaped window that looked out at the distant snow-capped mountains.

‘Excellency?’ Jugni’s voice reflected her uncertainty. Why was the Emperor wasting valuable time rehashing the same points when there was so much to be done? Assassins in the palace! Hidden amongst the imperial family!

‘How do you know she was the only one?’

Jugni and the other Chandikas opened their mouths silently, though no words came out.

‘She was the only one.’ Ashoka spoke matter-of-factly.

Bindusara turned to face them, his eyes finding his son and pinning him in place. ‘I did not ask you. I asked the Chandikas. If their order housed an enemy capable of colluding with the enemy, how do I know there aren’t more like her? How do I know that the entire Chandika order is not corrupted from within?’

One of the women gasped audibly. Jugni fell to her knees. ‘Excellency! What happened with this one traitor is unthinkable to us. We exist to serve the imperial family. To protect it with our lives. It is our sole purpose of living, our dharma. This traitor committed blasphemy against our order, an unforgivable crime. I assure you, such a corruption cannot happen to a single other Chandika. It is hard to believe it happened at all.’

‘And yet, it did happen.’ Bindusara stepped forward, hands still clasped behind his back, looking down at Jugni kneeling before him. ‘And if it can happen once, it can happen twice, or a hundredfold. Presumably you did not know of this traitor’s true allegiance until only an hour or two earlier? Who’s to say that even now you remain unaware of a hundred other such traitors? What if your entire order is corrupted from within, body, soul and sword sold to the Confederacy?’

‘Excellency!’ The other three Chandikas fell to their knees as well, all but prostrating themselves. Their faces expressed their extreme anguish at their liege’s accusations. Ashoka could see how much pain each word his father spoke was causing them. He clenched his fists, sharing their shame. He had been deceived by Chaand too, had shared his bed and his heart with an ally of their worst enemies, an ally of assassins hell-bent on killing his mother, siblings, himself.

‘Why is it so unlikely?’ Bindusara paced before them, his voice and face growing harder, more convinced of the argument he was proposing. ‘The traitor was in your order. You yourself acknowledge that fact. Why can there not be others like her? My father used to tell me that the Chandikas serve as a single being. All act for one, one acts for all. The betrayal of this single Chandika represents the betrayal of all Chandikas. How can an Order that has betrayed its sworn duty be trusted any longer?’

The four Chandikas remained bowed, faces revealing their anguish. None of them dared interrupt their emperor while he was in the throes of his monologue. Ashoka's fists tightened: was this the way an Emperor dealt with a crisis? By turning on his own protectors? Precious time was being wasted here while they bickered. Even now, the assassins could be preparing to strike—or striking this very moment. He thought of his mother and siblings, helpless and unprotected if an intruder should appear in their chambers, striking at them from behind without warning, and he felt his stomach coil with impatience.

‘You expect me to give you permission to run amok through the private chambers of my family? For all I know that might be the very plan you had from the very outset! A shrewd way to gain access to the most vulnerable members of the dynasty. Simple enough then to strike at unarmed queen mothers and their children, to eliminate them all in a single bloody sweep, all under the aegis of authority, with my own sanction! Do you take me for a fool?’

Ashoka could stand it no longer. He stepped forward, forcing himself to keep his voice free of the impatience he felt. ‘The Chandikas are not our enemy. If they wanted to attack us, they would have done so already. They had no need to give us this notice, to ask your permission.’ He pointed at the four kneeling women. ‘Assassins would not prostrate themselves and endure abuse silently.’

‘Abuse?’ Bindusara's eyes flashed hotly. ‘Watch yourself, son of Shubhadra!’

‘Yes, abuse,’ Ashoka said, standing up to his father. ‘The Chandikas have devoted their lives to protecting us. They are our first, last and best line of defence in such a crisis. We need them to root out these assassins right now. We are wasting time standing here and arguing about moot points!’

‘Arguing?’ Bindusara tilted his head, his posture aggressive. ‘You go too far, boy. I am the Emperor of Mauryavansh, I do not argue. I pronounce. How dare you question my pronouncements?’

‘You have already gone too far, Father. You have no right to make such accusations against your most loyal servants.’

Bindusara reared back, incredulous. ‘I have no right? Upstart boy! You have no right to speak to your Emperor thus!’

Ashoka kept his voice level, his hands by his sides. ‘Father, stop this. We need to go find the assassins before they act. Mother could be in danger!’

‘Silence!’ Bindusara's tone had risen several levels. His colour had risen

as well. 'I will not brook such impudence. Not from my son or from anyone else!'

There was a scream outside the imperial chambers. At once the four Chandikas were on their feet, hands at the hilts of their swords. Ashoka reached for his own weapon. A commotion was heard outside as drapes parted, someone gasped, and then a woman came into the room, hands covered with blood, on the verge of panic. The Chandikas stationed on guard outside accompanied her, swords drawn, holding her bloody hands.

'Excellency! Assassins! In the First Queen's chambers!'

Ashoka was moving as soon as the woman finished. He shot out of his father's apartments and past the startled Chandikas and the blood-spattered woman. She looked vaguely familiar. But then, it may have been her Khorasani features. From her attire and manner she was probably one of Queen Mother Khorasan's inner chamber maids. He raced out of the Emperor's palace and across the courtyard and the imperial gardens that separated it from the Queens' Palace. Dark-blue clad figures kept pace with him, swords drawn—the four senior Chandikas, relieved to be in action again but anxious that they might already be too late. Ashoka felt his own stomach clench and churn as he sprinted around a group of elderly daiimaas and their little wards, his youngest brothers and sisters. The young princes and princesses stared in awe at their elder brother and the Chandikas, running with bared weapons in the imperial palace.

Marbled floors, perfumed corridors, smoky incense, diaphanous drapes billowing ... He sprinted through the Queens Palace to the detached apartments of the First Queen, luxuriantly appointed on the outside, but with a sense of the desolation and sparseness of the Khorasani steppes. There were Chandikas and Khorasani women warriors everywhere, all milling about, hostile eyes and blades in hand. Everyone turned to stare as he entered, both the Khorasani and Chandikas starting to protest at the sight of a man, then drawing back when they recognized the second prince-in-waiting. He heard raised voices behind him and saw the Khorasanis say something harshly in their brash tongue to the Chandikas behind him. He didn't stop to see what that was about, and just barrelled on into the inner chambers.

He came to a halt in the First Queen's bedchamber.

Queen Noor Khorasan was sitting on a diwan, her gaze directed inwards. The floor and furnishings were spattered with blood, a lot of it. He looked down at the three bodies, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. His mind reeled, his stomach lurched, his sword hand rose and then fell, unable to decide whether to be prepared to fight or to stand down.

Confusion roared in his ears.

‘Traitors.’

His stepmother spoke the single word like an abuse, spitting it at the bodies sprawled on the floor. She looked up at Ashoka, her light blue-grey eyes glinting with hatred. ‘All traitors, every last one of them.’

Ashoka stared down at the bodies, then up at his stepmother. Nothing made sense anymore. He lowered his sword, unable to understand the world. Everything was upside down, the sky on the floor, the ocean in the clouds, the mountains on the edge of the world, slipping sideways.

‘I ...’ He was trying to say that he didn’t understand. But the words wouldn’t come out. Language had left him momentarily.

The commotion outside rose to a fever pitch. There was shouting now, and a struggle, and the sounds of swords and blades clanging. The drapes billowed and Jugni and the other seniors forced their way in. Behind them, he glimpsed the other Chandikas struggling with the Khorasani warriors, both groups aggressively shoving and arguing, on the verge of cutting and stabbing.

The Chandikas stared down at the three dead bodies, uncomprehending. He saw his own confusion reflected in their faces. He tried to find something to say but the words still wouldn’t come out.

‘How ...?’ Jugni started, then stopped. She fell to her knees, lifting up the prone corpses, turning them over to see their faces, each of the three in turn. ‘These are not of our Order! They are not Chandikas!’

‘They wear your uniforms. They came under the guise of being posted to my apartments. They tried to kill me. Unluckily for them, my maid and I are both Khorasani warriors, veterans of a hundred battles each. We put them down like the prairie dogs they are.’ Khorasan rose and went over to the bodies, kicking them as if she would kill them again if she could.

Jugni stared at Ashoka’s stepmother. ‘But Queen Khorasan ...’

Khorasan raised her eyes to Jugni’s face. ‘You and your Order were behind this all—the assassination plot, the Confederacy assassins. You brought these women into our home, to kill us. You told them to start with the First Queen and work their way downwards through the imperial family. You wanted to wipe out the entire Mauryavansh dynasty in a single day!’

A muttering of voices and parting of bodies and Emperor Bindusara entered. He took in the scene—Khorasan angrily hurling accusations, Jugni and her fellow Chandikas staring in bewilderment, the three bloody bodies dressed in Chandika blue-black uniforms on the floor—and a look came over his face. Ashoka had seen that look before. He knew what it

meant. It was the look of vindication. His father liked to be proven right. And he almost always was, with rare exceptions. He was proven right today, and he was pleased.

He looked at Ashoka, and his handsome face curled in a vindictive smile.

EIGHT

Apama's heart brightened as the camp came into view. The sight of Greek colours and faces always made her feel relieved. Not like coming home, exactly, but close enough. Even though Pataliputra was home and had been for the past half century, she still thought of herself as Greek, she felt Greek, she thought Greek. Pataliputra was home only in the sense that she lived there. Her real home was amongst her own people, wherever they might be in large enough numbers.

The carriage slowed to a halt. Her personal guard checked that everything was in order, exchanged a few pleasantries with the guards on duty. Apama smiled at the sound of her native language being spoken freely and openly. That was a sound she didn't hear often enough in Pataliputra.

The curtains of her palanquin parted and a familiar face looked in. Wizenened with age, blonde hair turned grey and thin, limbs reedy and bent but that smile still as warm and maternal.

'Helena!' Apama reached for and embraced the old woman warmly. 'Aphrodite watch over you! I thought you said you would never travel to this wretched land again.'

The woman shrugged as she helped Apama dismount from the palanquin. 'I go where duty takes me. And if he can endure this wretched country, so can I.'

'Even the monsoons?'

Helena made a face. 'I can take Aegyeen storms, Lydian gales, even Olympian whirlwinds. But Zeus spare me from another monsoon season. I came on the condition that your father would be leaving within the fortnight, long before the sky bursts open and tries yet again to wash this mud-brown land clean again and fails!'

Apama laughed as they walked the carpeted runway to the largest tent in the camp, arms hooked together. 'He couldn't do a thing without you, and he knows it. If he travels on his own, he can barely remember where he left his sword!'

'But he never forgets where he left his daughter.' The gravelly voice of her father drifted out from the interior of the tent as he turned to greet her. He bent his tall frame to kiss her on both cheeks in the Greek fashion, his

breath warm and redolent of good wine. 'It has been too long, my child. Your old father misses you every day, most of all when Mercury rises in the twilight sky each evening.'

'Father, you are most welcome to visit me anytime.' She smiled coyly at him, repeating the familiar joke. 'Just remember to bring your army with you and take over Jambudwipa when you do!'

He laughed as if hearing the joke for the first time. 'I would bring down all the gods from Olympus to rescue you from that swamp of Lethe you live in. But you know the terms of the pact as well as I do.'

'You signed that pact with my husband, Chandragupta Maurya, who has been in his grave these thirty years.'

Seleucus Nicator flashed a smile, not laughing this time. 'Yes, but his son is still alive, and he has an army even larger and more powerful than his father. Besides, that pact was written not by your husband, who could barely sign his name legibly, but by his priest, Kautilya. And that old brahmin knew how to draft a contract better than the shrewdest philosophers in Athens. Even my presence here is a violation of the terms. If I were to be found here, Mauryavansh would have the right to claim all my territories and holdings.'

Apama waved away his comments, accepting the glass of warm mulled wine that Helena handed her gracefully. She sank into a comfortable seat, as did her father, while Helena tended the brazier to keep the tent warm against the infringing cold. 'That has never stopped you before. You know as well as I do that it will never come to that.'

'Perhaps not in the past thirty years. But Mauryavansh is stretching its wings. Your stepson's ambitions are growing. He is on a spree. It wouldn't do for him to turn his attention to my satrapies.'

'Your satrapies are too far away for him to think about, leave alone manage. To even get to them, he would have to have a stronger foothold in Taxila and he can barely manage to keep his footing there right now.' She sipped the wine, relishing the sweet tang of berries. 'No, his attention is turned to the South and the East at present. The Southern kingdoms trouble him greatly. And Kalinga.'

Seleucus Nicator snorted. 'He has never known how to handle a republic. Anything that smells of socialist people's unions confuses him, fool that he is. He should have finished what his father started: invaded and crushed them before they could grow to this strength.'

She arched an eyebrow. 'And you would have let him? I thought your trade ties with Kalinga were stronger than ever now. I hear that two Greek ships land in their ports every moon-month, laden with Greek foods, wines

and philosophers. And they return home with the same weight in Kalingan spices, silks and artists.'

Seleucus toasted her. 'Your grasp of politics is as astute as ever. You need only look at the map of Jambudwipa to understand the importance of Kalinga. It is a gateway to the sub-continent. And my fastest source of replenishment. It takes a land contingent thrice the time to travel back home and return than it takes Greek ships to cover the same journey via Kalinga.'

'Bassein would be better though, would it not? It is on the West Coast, and that would be a straighter line to sail for Greek ships than having to go all the way round the horn of the subcontinent.'

Seleucus Nicator nodded, drinking deeply. 'It would. And someday we shall have that port as well. But until then Kalinga serves our purpose. You know what my old friend Alexander always said: Do what you can with what you have where you are.'

'You do a great deal with what you have, Father, far more than even Bindusara suspects. If he was aware of a fraction of your activities and involvement in his country, he would forget both the Southern kingdoms and Kalinga and dedicate the might of the Mauryavansh army to pushing you back beyond the Himalayas, and further away.'

Her father laughed, his pale blonde beard bristling. 'He would want to crush me like an eel between ships! But that will not happen because he will not find out about my activities here nor will he suspect my involvement.'

She nodded. 'He has other matters more pressing to engage him right now. There was an assassination attempt.'

Helena offered them roasted chestnuts. Seleucus Nicator cracked one open and crunched it with the enthusiasm of a man one fourth his age. 'Alexander used to say the true worth of an emperor is measured by the number of attempts on his life.'

'Except this was not an attempt on his life. It was something more than that.'

He looked at her, interested. 'Tell me.'

'The Lichchavi Confederacy sent an entire company of assassins, undercover, to infiltrate Pataliputra palace and slaughter the entire imperial family.'

His face darkened. 'Including you?'

She shrugged. 'They never got far. Bindusara's second eldest learned of the plot and rounded up the assassins. All but three who managed to slip into the First Queen's apartments and tried to kill her.'

‘Interesting. Any news of those three?’

‘They were killed by the First Queen and her maid, both Khorasani warriors. But here’s the thing, Father. They were in Chandika uniforms. And Ashoka also exposed another Chandika who was apparently a spy for the Confederacy.’

Seleucus Nicator leaned forward, blue eyes glinting in the flickering light from the brazier. ‘You don’t say. I thought those Chandikas swore allegiance for life.’

‘They do.’ She corrected herself. ‘They did. Bindusara believed they were all responsible for the lapses of those four who were caught and had the entire order disbanded.’

‘Disbanded?’ Seleucus asked. ‘You mean—?’

She nodded. ‘They face a trial tomorrow. If found guilty, they face exile or worse. First Queen Khorasan wanted them executed on the spot, but because of the order’s decades of service and the fact that it had been founded by his father, Bindusara chose to grant them a fair trial before the sabha.’

Seleucus Nicator nodded thoughtfully. ‘So the most powerful inner city guard in Pataliputra is removed, just like that.’ He snapped his fingers. ‘Big changes in your city. What else is new?’

She paused while Helena refilled her goblet. She smiled at the old lady, who nodded affectionately. Taking a sip of the wine, Apama turned back to her father. ‘I finally told him about the old priest killing his mother.’

Seleucus Nicator’s face slipped into a sly look. ‘As we had agreed. Well done. He believed you?’

‘Not easily at first. But by the time I finished, he was convinced.’

‘So now he believes that Kautilya was responsible for poisoning his mother to death, and almost killing him as well?’

‘Yes.’

The old Greek smiled. ‘Well done. If only he knew that it was we who poisoned his mother and tried to kill him. And that it was the old brahmin who saved him by cutting him out of her womb in the nick of time, barely breathing, and nursed him back to health.’

‘Or that Chanakya was shrewd enough to poison me with the same poison I used on Bindusara’s mother.’ Apama’s eyes glittered fiercely. ‘Causing me to lose my own son prematurely.’

Seleucus placed his hand on her thigh in a gesture that was anything but fatherly. ‘Our son. Had he been born he would have been Emperor today, not Bindusara, and all this would have been Greek territory under my rule.’

She nodded, her throat working as she recalled. 'I almost lost my life—'

'But you didn't.' He squeezed her thigh. 'You survived. And raised Bindusara as your own. Despite his wiliness Chanakya could never expose your attempt to commit murder without admitting to his own role in killing your child, Chandragupta's legitimate firstborn son, had all gone as we had planned. So he kept his mouth shut and let you become surrogate mother to Bindusara, who grew up regarding you as his own mother.'

'And now, he thinks that it was all Chanakya's doing,' Apama laughed.

'Good.' Seleucus took his daughter's free hand in his own, caressing it slowly, rubbing his long elegant fingers over her slender, shaped fingernails painted the colour of blood. 'That is important. Because Chanakya is the only one who could see through to the end of our plan, and understand our long game.'

She nodded. 'Bindusara won't be consulting Chanakya again about anything, you can be sure of that. He hates him bitterly now.'

Seleucus looked pleased. 'Then the way is clear for us to move ahead.'

She looked at him. 'Taxila?'

He nodded. 'Taxila. I am headed there directly. I have been building our presence there for some years, as you know. Now, I will foment rebellion among the Pashtuns. They are headstrong tribes, fond of drinking and feuding. It doesn't take much of a reason to get them to take up arms.' He gestured at the wooden chests piled in the corner of the large tent. 'And with some Grecian coin to finance it, a full-blown revolution can be easily arranged.'

'So you are finally moving ahead on the plan as we had discussed before. Trouble in Taxila will draw Bindusara away from Pataliputra.'

'Exactly. Then, when the time is right, we push into Mauryavansh territories from Kalinga as well. Forcing him to fight incursions on two fronts.' He picked up a sheathed sword and used it to tap the map laid out on a table nearby. 'It's a classic crab-claw tactic, and it will be especially effective because of the geography of the region. But in both cases, he will be lulled into believing they are only local uprisings.'

'And when he's engaged with both fronts, his attention divided, you will invade Pataliputra.'

Seleucus closed his fist around Apama's hand. 'And burn it to the ground, that shithole of a city, erase everything that Chandragupta Maurya built in his lifetime.'

'You will have to contend with the Mauryavansh army first. That is no small challenge. Bindusara may not be the military genius his father was, but he is no novice either. He has learned from the greatest mastermind of

any age after all. Chanakya's strategies foresee every eventuality, every outcome for a hundred years or more. He will have left detailed plans on how to confront and overcome a crab pincer of the sort you propose.'

He shrugged. 'Theory is no substitute for on-the-ground experience. I have used this tactic before a dozen times, and seen my mentor Alexander use it twice as many times. Bindusara may have the book on how to counter every possible strategy but the reality will not play out exactly as he anticipates. Timing is everything. I will lull him into believing the Taxila problem is resolved before re-opening that front. His forces will be on their way back when I attack—or on their way to Taxila again perhaps, I will decide that when the time comes. The point is, child of my body, I know Mauryavansh strategy because I have studied it for the better part of my life. Bindusara has never faced a threat of this magnitude by an enemy like myself. Two fronts several thousand miles apart and his capital city invaded? His army will be spread into a front thousands of miles wide. He won't know where to fight us and how. While he's busy keeping out the Taxilans and Kalingans, we'll take his empire piece by piece and swallow it whole.'

Apama stood and walked over to the table, looking over the carefully drawn map. 'It is a simple yet deadly strategy. I am sure you will execute it with the ferocity of a Stygian lion bearing down on sheep in a valley. Bindusara stands no chance.'

'Still, a good general leaves nothing to chance. I will fight the battle from without. I need you to fight the battle within.'

Apama smiled, pleased at being included as an equal in his estimation. 'I will play my part. I have already begun by fomenting doubt in his mind about his precious brahmin's intentions. Even now he must be asking himself how much of Chanakya's rules and strategies were devised with secret agendas. In time he will question every manual of warcraft and statecraft from battle strategy to sewage disposal, he will end up so confused about how to administer his empire that he will have no heart to withstand your ferocious assault. He may even decide not to put Chanakya's counter strategies into action when you use the crab pincer.'

'That would be a great help.' Seleucus rose and walked slowly to join Apama by the table. He set his wine goblet down on the map, leaving his hands free. 'Doubting and questioning Chanakya is a big step. That brahmin's strategies and ideas are the work of genius. Even our great Aristotle would admire his brilliance. By dismantling Bindusara's trust in his work, you have struck a deep wound at the core of the Mauryavansh empire. He will not even know how deep the damage is until it is much too

late. Or he may be too confused by his emotions to even realize his mistake at all. You have done well, Apama. I am proud of you.'

Apama beamed. 'You taught me well, Father. I am only the sword in your hand. Use me as you will.'

He showed his teeth, smiling at her in a manner that was predatory more than paternal. He placed a hand on her waist, still slender and firm despite her years and her failed attempt at childbearing in her younger age. 'I will use you in every way possible. A soldier uses everything and everyone to achieve victory. There will be a great deal of bloodshed in this campaign, and much of it will be shed by family killing family. The wolf within us is always the greater danger than the wolf without. My Greek legions will hurt the Mauryavansh army in the battlefield, but the enemy still outnumbers us three to one. We have to use strategy more than military might to ensure victory.'

She placed her palm upon him, slipping it into the open collar of his blouse, rubbing it against his firm chest. White hairs rippled at her touch but despite his age, the flesh beneath was muscle and sinew, a soldier's body. 'Tell me what you would have me do next, I will carry out your every command. Bindusara trusts me implicitly, I can manipulate him like a puppet on a string.'

He shook his head slowly. 'No. You must not overplay your hand. You have dealt Bindusara a body blow by sowing distrust against his mentor and advisor Chanakya. Do not push your luck by over-exploiting that relationship.' As he spoke he rubbed his hand across her rear, stroking her with unfatherly caresses.

'Then what would you have me do?'

'This assassination plot has given me an idea. If used correctly, such a move can tip the balance at the crucial time, distracting Bindusara just when he should be putting all his energy into the battlefield.'

'You wish me to have him killed?'

'No. The risk is too great. If found out, you will endanger yourself. I cannot afford to lose you. You must remain loyal to Bindusara outwardly. Remember that Chanakya's spies are all around you. Never say or do anything that could be construed as contrary to the Emperor's well-being. Continue playing the part of a concerned mother looking out for her son. But within that role, seek out others who have agendas. Foment rivalry within the imperial family. Pit queen against queen. Prince against prince. Breed paranoia, distrust, hatred. Encourage enmities. If they kill one another, it will create uncertainty, fear, confusion. Foment dissent, rage, fear. The more our enemy is disturbed within his own house, the less able

he is to withstand our assaults.'

'I understand, Father. I will do as you say. It will not be difficult. Every queen mother is constantly seeking ways to move her own son up the ladder of succession. Every son is looking for ways to bring his elder brothers down so he may rise.'

His hands began moving more aggressively. 'And watch any of them that bears watching. Especially the princes-in-waiting.'

'I watch them closely. Sushim is no danger. Ashoka on the other hand ... he is a hard one to understand. The boy is part-general, part-spy, part-soldier. Whatever Chanakya taught him in the forest, he taught him well. The oddest thing is that he seems to have no ambition. He acts as if he does not care if he ever becomes Emperor.'

'Watch him the closest. Those are the ones that can be real threats.'

'I will, Father.' She then sighed softly. 'When do you leave for Taxila?'

'I break camp tomorrow at dawn.'

'Then we do not have much time. Let us make the most of it.'

'I fully intend to.' He crushed her in his grip.

NINE

‘Maa.’

Shubhadrangi turned at the sound of her son’s voice. She was walking with Queen Mother Tissyanka and her daughter Tissya in the imperial gardens. Many of the queen mothers and imperial siblings were also in the gardens. Ever since the morning’s shocking events, nobody wanted to stay in their apartments. There were still rumours circulating about the possibility of assassins still being in the palace complex—nobody was quite sure of whom to trust, and it seemed safer to stay out in public where one could see and be seen, rather than in an enclosed apartment where your own guards could try to assassinate you.

‘Ashoka!’ His mother embraced him at once, hugging him tightly. He hugged her back, neither caring about the jealous looks from the other queen mothers preening about in all their finery. Most of the other queens couldn’t get their sons or daughters to talk civilly to them, leave alone treat them with affection. The fact that showing affection openly was considered a sign of weakness may have had something to do with it. Ashoka was a rare exception.

He held his mother at arm’s length and looked at her with genuine concern. ‘I’m sorry I could not come sooner. I sent a message with Radhagupta ...’

‘He warned me ... us.’ She gestured to include Tissyanka who smiled in greeting. ‘But I was so worried when I heard. Is it true about the Chandikas? I can’t believe it!’

Ashoka glanced around, only now aware of the keenly watching eyes. He took his mother’s elbow, leading her aside behind a large flowering tree. He sat her down on the stone bench beneath the tree, mostly hidden from their audience of non-admirers. ‘I can’t say much here, too many ...’ He gestured, and she nodded at once, understanding. ‘But yes, the Chandikas have been taken off duty with immediate effect. By imperial order.’

She raised a hand to her mouth in a shock. ‘I can’t believe it. Surely not all of them could be involved?’

Ashoka glanced around again, saw no one close enough to hear them and spoke cautiously. ‘As far as I know, only one of them was actually

involved. Chaand.'

His mother nodded. 'Radhagupta told me about that. It's terrible what happened to you. But you couldn't have known.'

He sighed in frustration. 'I feel like I should have, Mother. She and I ... we became very close.'

'Son, I understand. And I can only imagine how painful it must be for you right now. But it's obvious in retrospect that she got close to you because she was working for the enemy.'

He nodded. 'I know that. But that's the point, maa. She was working for the enemy, that was it. There was no evidence that any of the other Chandikas were involved.'

Shubhadrangi stared. 'But the Chandikas who attacked Khorasan? The assassins?'

Ashoka grimaced. 'Assassins? I examined the bodies of the attackers. One was surely an assassin. She had the physical condition of a warrior, the scars and the concealed weapons, even a leaf of a poisonous shrub in a layer of her vastra. But the other two? I would bet my right hand they were daiimaas.'

'You mean wet nurses? How could you possibly know that? Maybe they were Lichchavi Confederacy assassins disguised as daiimaas to infiltrate the palace.'

'That would have made sense. But it was the other way around. They were daiimaas who had been killed then dressed as Chandikas to make them pass off as Lichchavi Confederacy assassins.'

She frowned, absorbing that for a moment. 'But how could you be so sure?'

He looked down in embarrassment. 'They were ... nursing. You know what I mean ...' He gestured in the general direction of his chest, glancing away. 'There were milk stains on the insides of their garments. And their breasts were full of ... milk. Their physical condition was soft and they clearly hadn't seen a day of hard exercise in their lives. Nor did they have any sword or bow calluses, scars, fighting injuries, not even any sign of rigorous training. They were daiimaas all right. I hardly think the Lichchavi Confederacy sends wet nurses in their condition to execute daring assassinations in the heart of Pataliputra. Besides, they were supposed to be Chandikas who were secretly working for the Confederacy. In that physical condition? Impossible! But even if you were to believe that soft, flabby, nursing mothers could somehow be Confederacy assassins posing as crack Chandika imperial guards, how do you explain the fact that not a single Chandika had ever seen either of these two before

in their lives?’

Shubhadragni’s hand covered her mouth, astonished. ‘So you mean to say that ... They weren’t assassins at all? But then why did they attack Queen Khorasan in her chambers?’

Two queens strolled by, greeting Ashoka and Shubhadragi with nearly mocking cheerfulness. Ashoka waited till they had passed out of hearing range. Then he looked around again before replying. ‘I don’t think they attacked her at all. I think they were killed and then passed off as assassins. Radhagupta says one of his sources among the daiimaas reported that one of the queens had asked for two new daiimaas to interview for the job.’

‘But that couldn’t have been Noor. She doesn’t have any children so why would she need to interview daiimaas?’

‘All the more reason for her to escape suspicion. Also, the two daiimaas had obviously been killed first and only then put into the Chandika uniforms. They were both killed by stabbing but their Chandika uniforms were not ripped in the places they should have been. The blades somehow passed through the garments without cutting them and only penetrated their flesh! And there was almost no blood where they were found, even though the wounds were enough to spill enough to fill a bucket.’

‘So you mean Noor Khorasan herself—?’

‘And her personal servant Orzala, yes. It had to have been the two of them. They were the only two in the chamber with the dead women.’

‘But you said that one of the women was an assassin?’

‘Yes, she must have been the surviving Confederacy assassin still at large. She must have come into the palace to seek further instructions. And since she was found in Queen Khorasan’s chambers and because of the other inconsistencies ... Well, you get my drift.’

Queen Shubhadragi was silent. The implications were obvious. Ashoka was saying that Queen Khorasan was the member of the imperial family who had masterminded the assassination plot, and when it was on the verge of failing, she had silenced the last surviving assassin to conceal her own involvement. ‘But why blame the Chandikas? This will ruin their reputation. What possible reason could Queen Noor Khorasan have for discrediting them?’

Ashoka shrugged. ‘I don’t understand the politics of it. That’s why I came to you. I thought maybe you might make sense of it.’

‘I could try but you need to take this to someone who understands the larger implications.’

Ashoka nodded. ‘I intend to make a trip to see Guruji. I want to leave tonight. That’s why I came to see you.’

‘Be careful, Ashoka. Who knows what other implications there are to this situation? Be careful whom you speak to and what you say.’

‘I know that. The only person I actually regret speaking to is father. When I learned about Chaand’s betrayal, I needed his permission to search the palace, so I took Jugni and the other senior Chandikas to see him. But we were already too late.’ He slammed his fist against his open palm in frustration. ‘If only Guru Kautilya were still here in Pataliputra. He would have seen through the entire plot in an instant and told us how to anticipate every move.’

‘But he’s not here. And your father has too many things on his mind. He doesn’t see things the way you or I do. Being Emperor means looking at things very differently than citizens, or even a prince or a queen.’

‘I get that. But it doesn’t mean being unable to see things as others do. He’s just too narrow-minded to see beyond the end of his nose, that’s all. He began interrogating me and the Chandika seniors instead of letting us search the palace. Precious time was lost! If he had just given his permission when we asked, we might have—’ He broke off, waiting until an entourage of several of the younger queens, dressed more for an imperial occasion than for a stroll in the gardens, had passed by, studiously ignoring their older sister-queen with the uncaring arrogance of youth. ‘He is suspecting all the wrong people and taking all the wrong decisions.’

‘But, Ashoka, after all, Chaand was a traitor. You discovered that yourself.’

‘Yes, but only Chaand. The rest of it was just a ruse, a clever trick to shift the blame for the plot to the order, instead of the real people behind it.’

‘Are you sure of that?’

‘As sure as I am that this is a plum tree and that in a few weeks ripe, juicy plums will be ready to pluck and eat from its boughs.’

She smiled at the comparison. ‘Even so, he had a right to be suspicious based on the evidence.’

‘The evidence was fabricated. I’ve told you how the two other women couldn’t have been assassins or Chandikas. And the one who was an assassin was never a Chandika.’

‘Your father must be aware of these facts. He would have had the bodies examined too.’

‘By War Marshall Khorasan! Queen Noor’s own mother. Whom do you think she would side with in this matter? The Emperor of Mauryavansh or her own daughter?’

‘The Emperor, I would hope, since she is war marshall and has pledged

loyalty to the Empire. I am sure she will find the same details you found and draw the right conclusions. You will see, Ashoka. Everything will turn out right in the end. Your father will see the truth and do the right thing. Trust in him. Trust in justice.'

Ashoka looked at his mother, his frustration evident as he tried to make her see what he saw. 'Justice? There is no justice in Pataliputra. Justice itself is being put on trial.'

'What do you mean? Don't speak about your own country like that. I have taught you better than that. Besides, this is no time to make treasonous statements like that, son. You have to learn to be cautious and stay loyal to the family. Family is all we have when surrounded by our enemies.'

'Mother, I'm not just saying it. No just emperor would put innocents on trial and not as much as question the ones most clearly to gain from such a plot.'

She looked at him curiously, her plain but pleasant features creasing in a frown. 'What innocents? What trial?'

'The Chandikas. They are being tried for treason in the sabha. The trial begins tomorrow and if found guilty, they face immediate execution.'

His mother stared at him in shock. This time, she had nothing to say.

Ashoka glanced around then rose from the bench. 'I must go now. I ride for Guru Kautilya's ashram at once. If I ride all evening and most of the night I should reach him in time to consult with him and return by tomorrow evening. I came to ask you to go to the trial tomorrow and attend it. Do what you can to prevent a final verdict being reached before I return. I will be back as soon as possible with Guru Kautilya. He will know what to do and say. He will set things right. He is the only one who truly understands justice and cares about Mauryavansh. Bye, Mother, take care and stay safe. I will see you soon.'

He bent and kissed her on the forehead, then hurried away.

TEN

Kautilya woke from dreams of Vyag. Lions, specifically. The Sanskrit word Vyag referred to all great cats: lions, tigers, leopards, panthers ... local dialects had their own terms for each species but to most people they were all large, wild cats. The old guru knew better. Each had very different qualities and characteristics. Lions hunted and lived in prides; females cared for the cubs and kept them away from the males, who lived mostly solitary lives from the time they were grown until they aged and had to once again find a female to support them. Most of the other cats were solitary creatures, but lions had a pack mentality and that made them unique. This was the chief reason he had chosen the Lion as the symbol and mascot of Mauryavansh. Back when he had mentored a young upstart rebel named Chandragupta, grooming him to overthrow the dreaded Nanda empire, they had needed a symbol, something around which people could rally, something representing heroism, strength, power, pride, and unity. Kautilya had had a dream of Chandragupta as a silver-haired emperor seated upon a throne in a chamber surrounded by animals of every species, all warring savagely with each other in a nightmarish bloodletting. But at the head of them all sat Chandragupta, older, scarred by war wounds but powerful and calm, surrounded by lions. Several females stood, sat or prowled around him, protecting his perimeter, while a handful of cubs sat by his feet. There were no other male lions. Kautilya had interpreted this vision as a sign. Chandragupta would be a great emperor, with many queens who would bear him sons, and no rivals, but would rule over an empire fraught with warring factions. This vision had mirrored the reality of Jambudwipa at the time, with over five hundred warring tribe kingdoms, and he had known on waking that it was the perfect symbol of not just an emperor, but of a dynasty. That was the true significance of the Lion as a symbol: family. It was the only powerful jungle-dominating predator that lived as a family, working together to hunt, survive, breed, nurture.

Today, that Lion symbol marked every official item of Mauryavansh: coinage, signage, sculptures, art, declarations. The Mauryavansh empire and the dynasty founded by Chandragupta Maurya had brought peace and unity to the five hundred tribes, and apart from the inevitable local

conflicts and feuds, the entire subcontinent had accepted, even welcomed the rule of the Lion.

Tonight's dream was a sequel to that one. It disturbed him.

He emerged from his hut to something less disturbing: the familiar faces of his proteges Ashoka and Radhagupta. Both were seated cross-legged, waiting patiently for their guru to rise. The clearing outside the hut was still dusky in the pre-dawn hour, the sky above the forest tinted with the promise of first light.

'Gurudev.' Both Ashoka and Radhagupta bent low to touch their guru's feet, touching the tips of the same fingers to their chests and then their foreheads, asking his blessings to strengthen their hearts and minds.

'Ayushmaanbhavya, shishya.' He blessed them both, wishing them long life. He was pleased to see them. He had grown accustomed to his isolated hermetic life here in the depths of Girvan forest, but his ties to Pataliputra were strong. Not a day went by when he did not miss the bustle and hustle of the big city. He breathed deeply and exhaled through creaking lungs, remembering those glory days when he had dominated politics from the side of the most powerful man in the known world. He missed Chandragupta, his booming laugh, his carefree attitude even in the face of the most venomous threat, his amazing ability to execute Kautilya's most complex plans with physical action that was breathtaking to witness.

He looked at the grandson of Chandragupta now, a young man neither as handsome nor as tall and imposing as his grandfather, almost ugly in fact, and short and slender, unimposing and unimpressive to look at, barely worth a second glance on a crowded Pataliputra street. But there was something to Ashoka that recalled not just Chandragupta but other great warriors and rulers Kautilya had known in his 96-year-lifetime. A quality of stillness, both of body and mind, that one usually saw only in the most accomplished of sages. He had known brahmins who had spent lifetimes in ghor tapasya, deep forest deprivation and transcendental meditation, to acquire that level of calm readiness. Ashoka had been born with it. The daiimaas present at the prince's birth had been alarmed at the new born child's silence, fearing still birth or disability. It had taken three slaps on the chubby buttocks to get the infant wailing, not with shock, but with outrage. They had been relieved but Kautilya had noted how quickly the crying subsided and how quiet the babe was afterwards, even as the other infants within earshot had continued bawling in solidarity.

Ashoka stood before him with the same quietness of body and spirit, his palms joined in respectful greeting. Of all his more than one hundred siblings, he was the only one who made this arduous journey to Kautilya's

ashram willingly and Kautilya felt pleased. Whatever other problems Mauryavansh faced, the lack of a suitable heir was not one of them. Not the prince-in-waiting, true, but a prince-in-waiting certainly. There was hope ahead for the empire and the dynasty and that hope was named Ashoka.

Kautilya's youngest disciples heard the sound of their guru's voice and rose sleepily from the straw pallets. Rubbing the sleep from their eyes they came to greet their guru—prostrating themselves fully as befitted their novitiate status—and rising up to offer their assistance for his morning ablutions as usual.

‘Gurudev, permit me.’

Ashoka stepped forward, taking the handle of the small copper pot from one of the young brahmins. The shishya looked surprised. A prince of Mauryavansh voluntarily offering to serve his guru? The young boy looked up at Ashoka, awe struck. Kautilya rubbed the disciple's bald head affectionately. ‘Gauta, not everybody needs to be told to serve their guru, some do it out of love for service.’ He gave the young novice's single hair braid a flick, then made his way through the narrow path through the forest to the river. Radhagupta came with them, following closely behind.

A soft dawn breeze made Kautilya shiver a little. Ashoka noticed but said nothing. That was another of the young man's many admirable traits. Unlike his sneering elder brother Sushim, who seemed to constantly bicker and comment on everything in sight, as if it were his life's calling to criticize everything and everyone. Ashoka reserved judgement and kept his opinions to himself, invaluable qualities for a future ruler.

The sky was lightening by the time Kautilya was done with his morning ablutions. Ashoka and Radhagupta joined him in the sandhyavandana. The three of them stood waist-deep in the river, chanted the auspicious mantras, as the jungle awakened around them. Birds called out, rising in gigantic flocks hundreds of thousands strong, large as clouds, wheeling one way then another. Predators growled and grumbled in the woods as their hunting hours came to an end and they slipped down to the river for a drink of water before retiring to sleep the day away in shady nooks. Leaf and grass eaters roamed freely, entire herds passing by. Even the crowds of Pataliputra seemed puny by comparison to this dense animal thoroughfare.

They returned to the ashram and partook of refreshment. Ashoka ate the meagre fruit that was offered to him. Which other prince of Pataliputra would eat such simple fare without complaint? Sushim was notorious for throwing tantrums unless served a veritable feast at every meal.

Kautilya sat on the freshly swept floor of the ashram's gurukul with his

two best disciples.

Ashoka summed up the events of the past few days, detailing everything that had happened from the time he overheard the two Lichchavi Confederacy assassins talking in the public house up to the apprehension of the Chandikas on suspicion of conspiracy and treason. Radhagupta filled in what he knew, adding details that only the brahmin caucus was privy to in Pataliputra. Due to the deeply ingrained bigotry of the caste system of Jambudwipa, the four castes or 'varnas' as they were known operated independently of each other, similar to the way guilds operated in western kingdoms. Unlike guilds, however, caste prejudice was deep-rooted, systemic and endemic. Only rarely did brahmins and kshatriyas ally together, leave alone befriend, love, or inter-marry. A preceptor or guru's bond with his kshatriya lord was an exception but even this bond was tested when a caste transgression occurred. Kautilya had lost count of the many times he had faced the wrath of the brahmin caucus of Pataliputra back when he was Guru to Chandragupta Maurya. His crime was mostly that he was seen to be favouring his Emperor—a kshatriya, as all rulers had to be warriors and killers as well as meat-eaters—rather than doing what was politic for the brahmins of the empire. It had led to his growing unpopularity within his own varna, and his eventual ouster from the power circles of the caucus, the ambitious preceptors of the most powerful tribal chiefs among the five hundred who made up the sabha that governed polity and administration for the empire. That had been a big blow, leading eventually, inevitably to his forced retirement from Pataliputra, and his setting up his ashram and gurukul here in the Girvan jungle.

It was only thanks to Radhagupta and Ashoka and a network of young supporters that he had been able to maintain his ties with the empire, continuing to draw surreptitiously on the vast secret network of spies he himself had recruited and installed decades earlier. Still, no amount of information was of use if one did not have power, or the ability to influence those with power. After decades of being the force behind the emperor, policy maker and author of the rules and laws that governed the largest empire in the known world, it was hard for Kautilya to remove himself from the nexus of power and live a rustic life in this remote jungle, but he had no choice. Even now, with his two visitors looking to him for advice and guidance, he had no illusions.

He heard them out and when they were done, he sighed.

'What do you expect of me?'

Ashoka and Radhagupta exchanged a glance.

‘Don’t you see, the Chandikas are innocent. It’s a plot to falsely blame them, to deflect attention from the real culprit.’

Kautilya regarded Ashoka, seeing his mother’s features in him more and more clearly each time he saw the young man. ‘All true. Everything you have concluded is correct. The Lichchavi Confederacy assassination plot was masterminded by Queen Noor Khorasan, with her mother the war marshall either privy to the plot or actively involved with it. It would be an easy enough matter for the war marshall to meet with the Confederacy and negotiate such a plan, offering promises and rewards if successfully achieved, with no trace of suspicion ever leading back to the Queen herself. And no matter how the plot played out, those promises and rewards would never be forthcoming of course. The Confederacy died the day it was founded. Merely by banding together to resist the Mauryavansh Empire, instead of joining us when invited, they signed their own death warrant. They make the perfect scapegoat in such a plan. If they had succeeded, the war marshall herself could petition the sabha and Emperor for permission to invade Lichchavi and crush them for their insolence. Since they failed ... well, if they had simply failed, that would have been even easier. But because they failed so spectacularly, leaving a burning trail pointing back to Khorasan, something had to be done.’

‘Then you agree that the posing of the daiimaas as Chandikas was deliberately done by Queen Khorasan to falsely shift blame to the order?’

‘Most assuredly so. It was a brilliant move. Because of your own testimony implicating a Chandika as a traitor, your father has every right to suspect all Chandikas now. In the interests of the dynasty’s safety and the empire’s security, he has done exactly what could be expected under the circumstances. Do not blame him for his actions. Blame those who masterminded this devilish plot.’

‘Queen Noor Khorasan. Then we must expose her.’

Kautilya regarded his young protege. ‘That is the one thing you must not do. Already you have endangered yourself by thwarting the assassination plot and exposing the link to the enemy within. If you attempt to point the finger of blame at your stepmother, she will have no choice but to act against you. And mark my words, Ashoka, she will not hesitate to use violence.’

Ashoka gripped the hilt of his sword, laid out before him on the mud floor. ‘Violence is a two-edged blade.’

‘I have taught you warcraft. I have guided your training as a warrior. But I have also taught you there is a time to fight, and a time to think. This is a time to think, not fight.’

‘What is there to think about? Queen Khorasan plotted to kill my father and my family. She must be exposed and brought to justice.’

‘Do you think she doesn’t know that? She has already been two steps ahead of you. Why do you think she blamed the Chandikas for the plot?’

Ashoka frowned, not understanding.

‘Because of you, my prince. Had the word of the plot come from anyone else, she would not have taken it as seriously. But when you involved yourself, she had no choice. She knew you would not simply let the Chandikas handle the matter. They would have caught the assassins and stopped the plot, and that would have been all. But you exposed the Chandika traitor, and exposed the link to Khorasan herself. That was far more than she had bargained for. She had to take drastic measures to protect herself against you.’

‘Against me? But—’ Ashoka trailed off, his eyes drifting as he thought through the implications of the Acharya’s words.

‘If she had not been proactive, if you and the senior Chandikas had convinced your father to grant permission to serve the imperial residences, you would have apprehended the surviving Lichchavi assassin. Perhaps even caught her alive. Tell me, did any of the other assassins talk under torture?’

Ashoka shook his head. ‘Not one of them made it alive to the Torture Palace. Every last one of them had a leaf of a poison herb. They managed to eat the leaves before they could be stopped. All of them died bleeding from their ... their orifices.’

Kautilya looked at Radhagupta. The young brahmin nodded. ‘Sweetkiller leaf. Its action is instantaneous. The leaf only grows in the Lichchavi ranges. They came prepared.’

‘So this last assassin was a threat to them, she had to die.’

‘But the Chandikas? Why them?’

Kautilya looked at Ashoka. ‘With the Chandikas gone, who remains to prevent another assassination attempt?’

Ashoka answered slowly. ‘Nobody. The order has protected the imperial family for half a century. But with them gone ...’

‘The Khorasans are thinking two moves ahead. Their every action is an endgame, not merely a counter-move. They will come for you next, Ashoka.’

‘If they do then they will reveal themselves, Acharya.’

‘They are too shrewd for that. They will find a way to attack you without being seen. You must beware danger from unexpected places.’

‘I expect danger any time, all the time. It is how you trained me,

Gurudev.’

‘Good, Ashoka. But you are a warrior. They are politicians. They are capable of things you cannot foresee or understand. Always be wary of the enemy who does not abide by the rules of war. They use terror itself as a tactic. Even now, their full plan is not yet revealed. You have only ripped open a small tear in the fabric of their planning. Their true ambition remains to be seen.’

‘What other ambition could they have except to control the throne of Mauryavansh? You taught me that is the ultimate game of every political player.’

‘It is. But how one controls the throne can differ. One can manipulate a kingdom from behind a veil, an empire from the queens’ palace. There are many ways.’

‘Queen Khorasan has no sons or daughters. She can never be Queen Mother.’

‘That is why she resorts to such elaborate plots and ruses. There are three chief ways she can gain control of the reins of Mauryavansh.’

Ashoka thought about it. ‘Through my father ... That’s one. She is already his most favoured queen.’

‘And bedmate.’ Radhagupta coloured as soon as he had made the suggestion. ‘He spends more nights in her chambers than any other queen’s. Including Queen Shubhadra’s. Pardon my impudence, my prince.’

‘No need to apologize, shishya. Ashoka is no infant. He is a full-blooded young man. He has taken lovers of his own. He knows well the intimacies between men and women, men and men, women and women, and the other sexes as well. For as we know, gender is not binary. You know your scriptures. The tale of Arjuna, the tale of Mohini—our literature is replete with intimate details of sexuality. Any kshatriya or brahmin seeking to rise in the ranks of power must be intimately familiar with the details of such relationships. Especially you, Ashoka, for unless you understand every knowable aspect of human nature, how will you rule yourself, leave alone a kingdom, or an empire?’

‘I stand corrected, Acharya. My celibate vows make it embarrassing for me to speak openly about such matters.’

‘Don’t be embarrassed,’ Kautilya paused. ‘You must not take your vows too seriously. Find yourself a suitable partner, male or female or otherwise, as you wish. Inform yourself in the ways and wiles of sexual liaisons. It is vital to your progress as a thinker and advisor. I have groomed you to be the preceptor of Mauryavansh someday, to act as Ashoka’s advisor and

mentor when I am gone. In order to do this, you must know of such matters.’ The old sage’s black pupils twinkled with a rare gleam of humour. ‘And there’s nothing like a good roll on a straw pallet to relieve you of your intellectual stresses!’

Radhagupta coloured even more deeply. The young brahmin bowed his shaven pate low, touching his guru’s feet, his single braid of hair flopping forward, then flying back as he straightened up. He remained wordless, not trusting himself to voice any further comments on the matter. Ashoka smiled at his discomfiture.

‘So Queen Khorasan has seduced my father well. But she would need more than that to control him surely?’

‘You would be surprised, young Ashoka. You may not be celibate like Radhagupta here, but you are still a novice in the art of love and war. They are often two sides of the same bed. I have seen kingdoms raised and ruined by the manipulation of a mistress, battles influenced by the rise or fall of a penis, entire kingdoms lost for the lure of a yoni. Study your Vyasa. Sex was responsible for more political upheavals in the great Mahabharata than anything else. It was not very different in the Ramayana either. Whether a penis or a yoni, or both, the attraction of sexual fulfillment leads people to unexpected ends, and when those people happen to be kings and queens, the ends are often epic climaxes.’

Ashoka laughed, unable to help himself.

Kautilya joined in, laughing even louder, though more hoarsely and with some wheezing.

After a moment, hesitantly, Radhagupta joined in, tittering with the other two.

Later, after they had recovered from the bout of amusement, Ashoka picked up the lost thread of the discussion. ‘So, one way Khorasan could control Mauryavansh is through sex then. You mentioned three ways. What are the other two ways, Gurudev?’

‘The second is through a surrogate. Preferably a son. Mothers of kings are often as powerful as kings themselves. At times even more so.’ Kautilya fell silent, apparently in thought.

‘But she does not have a son. And even if she bears a son now, it will be years before he can ascend the throne.’

Kautilya inclined his head in agreement. ‘He need not be her own son. All she needs is a puppet prince. Someone who needs her support to stay on the throne, and who repays her support by yielding to her political choices.’

Ashoka shook his head, confused. ‘I don’t follow. Is that even possible

...?’ He stopped, remembering. ‘Of course. Dowager Queen Apama. She is not my father’s real mother. Yet he regards her as if she were his birth mother.’

‘Precisely. Because she raised him as her own from the day he was born. By the time he was old enough to understand the fine distinction between a birth mother and an adoptive mother, he was already bonded to her. What conversations take place between them is known to no one, not even our spies.’ Kautilya looked questioningly at Radhagupta. ‘Unless our spies have succeeded at last in breaching that gap. Radhagupta?’

Radhagupta shook his head. ‘Nay, Acharya. We have tried but each time the Greeks or the Chandikas caught our spies and sent them to the Torture Palace. We have been unable to insinuate a new asset into the Greek apartments since the last one. They are too alert and too suspicious of any non-Greeks.’

Kautilya accepted that calmly. ‘To come back to my point about Khorasan. She needs a prince to manipulate, one who needs something from her in turn. There are not many candidates worthy of her consideration. But you, of course are.’

‘I?’ Ashoka looked astonished.

‘You underestimate your own value. You are not only second prince-in-waiting, you are the only prince of Mauryavansh actually capable of ascending to the throne and following in your grandfather Chandragupta’s steps.’

‘You mean my father’s steps?’

Kautilya merely looked at his protege without answering.

Ashoka nodded, understanding. The guru had said what he meant. ‘But Noor Khorasan would be wasting her time. I have no desire to ascend to the throne.’

‘We do not always get what we desire, and what we desire is not always what comes to pass.’

Ashoka considered that for a moment. ‘There are others who would be more interested in such an alliance. Sushim for certain, Vitashoka, Taranatha, Divyadan ...’

‘Almost any of the princes would leap at such an arrangement.’ Radhagupta agreed.

‘To my mind, there are only a handful that would serve her purpose. Ashoka has named the prime candidates. Of them, he himself and Sushim are the best of the best. Noor Khorasan is no fool. She is seeking a surrogate who will stay the course.’

‘Or at least until she bears her own son to replace him.’ Ashoka

shrugged. 'The way Dowager Queen Satyavati ruled Kurujangala through Vichitravirya and Chitrangada, and later through Pandu and then Dritarashtra.'

Kautilya's age-creased forehead wrinkled further. 'Khorasan has no Bhishma to act as Regent. Then again, she has Jezza Khorasan, her own mother, who is no Bhishma, but is a vicious and capable war marshall. Yes, what you say is true, Ashoka. In such a scenario she may even prefer a less likely candidate such as your brother Tissa.'

'Tissa!' Ashoka smiled at the thought of his sensitive younger sibling having any dealings with the likes of Noor Khorasan. 'She would eat him alive.'

'And that would suit her purpose well. With a Tissa, she would never need to worry about his power growing too great for her to manage. And he would always be under her thumb. Some of your other brothers—Vitashoka, Divyadan, Taranatha, for instance, have many major failings, some too major to make them competent monarchs. They would turn upon her within weeks of ascending the throne, leaving her back where she started, perhaps even worse off. Vitashoka's temper and his outspoken bigotry would alienate most of the sabha chiefs. Divyadan's excessive fondness for gambling and wine make him a less than ideal choice. Taranatha's hedonistic excesses outdo even the historic orgies of Phillip of Macedonia, father of Alexander.'

Both Radhagupta and Ashoka nodded. Despite hardly having seen the young princes in question, Acharya Kautilya's assessments were picture perfect. A master of analysis, he collated all the news and information received from his pupils through the spies still loyal to the founder of their guild, and sifted the gold from the grain, using it to deadly effect at such moments. Ashoka wondered once again, for the thousandth time, what it must have been to have known Kautilya in his prime, a younger more virile and physically robust man, dominating the affairs and administration of the empire. Still, he counted himself fortunate to know him at all. It was an advantage all his siblings lacked. He would pit a single, old Kautilya against a dozen Queen Noor Khorasans any time.

'It will be Sushim or Ashoka, those are my predictions.'

'What of the third means?'

Kautilya sighed and looked up at the bright morning sky now visible above the clearing. The brahmacharyas of the ashram had completed their chores and one by one had gathered around to hear the discussion between their guru and the two glamorous visitors from Pataliputra. Ashoka wondered what they made of the more 'adult' parts of the discussion and

recalled that to a master like Acharya Kautilya, knowledge was never anything to be ashamed of possessing. Knowledge is neither adult nor juvenile, merely knowledge.

It was a long time before the Acharya continued. 'The third method Khorasan will use to seize control of Mauryavansh is the most direct method of all. By simply taking over, in a military coup.'

Ashoka nodded. This had already occurred to him during the discussion. 'She would announce herself as Empress? But would the sabha chiefs accept her as head of Mauryavansh?'

'No. Never. As a Khorasani, she can never be bipartisan. The appeal of Chandragupta Maurya, and the chief reason I picked him as my candidate to overthrow the Nandas and create a new empire, was his lack of association with any one tribe or gotra. He was a Maurya and the Maurya clan itself had been wiped out by Emperor Dhana Nanda during their pogrom of elimination. To support Chandragupta was to support Chandragupta himself, not a clan or tribe with multiple alliances, enemies and entanglements. That was why he was perfect to rule as the first Emperor of Jambudwipa. Bindusara was equally acceptable though his association with the Ajivika made some chiefs uncomfortable and his close bond with Dowager Queen Apama makes some Greek-haters furious, Khorasan herself included. Noor Khorasan, or any other Khorasani, would never be accepted as the Empress of Mauryavansh. The five hundred chiefs would roar with fury. The sabha would dissolve and the empire fragment before such a thing could come to pass.'

Ashoka and Radhagupta both frowned. 'Then how does she plan to rule after a coup?'

'She can't. Not over Mauryavansh as it exists today. She knows that. Without a ruler strong enough to hold it together, it is inevitable that the empire will collapse. What Khorasan will do is seek military allies, anyone strong enough to join her in carving up the body of Mauryavansh, taking a choice portion for herself, leaving the rest to them. They would be like dogs tearing apart the body of the empire, each chewing their own haunch of bleeding flesh.'

'Who would ally with her?'

'There are many powerful armies resistant to Mauryavansh even now. None individually strong enough to stand up to our might, but allied with Khorasan, and backed by a single giant power, they would suffice to create an alternate power structure. The map of Jambudwipa would be redrawn, creating new states, new borders, a new empire.'

'This giant power ... Whom do you mean, Acharya?'

‘There is only one military force strong enough to challenge Mauryavansh. Allied with Khorasan and those few dozen chiefs disgruntled enough to throw in their lot, it would not match up to the empire your grandfather and I created, but it would still be a formidable political power.’

‘The Cholas, the Chalukyas, Ujjain, Taxila, Kalinga, the Lichchavi Confederacy ...’ Ashoka reeled off names of several other smaller states that continued to resist the empire. ‘But none of them is a giant power,’ he concluded.

‘Nowhere near. There is only one giant in the subcontinent apart from Mauryavansh. Your grandfather and I successfully kept it at bay, though I always advised him to push all the way north and crush it completely, chase its dregs like a beaten cur with its tail between its legs, all the way back home to Macedonia. But your grandfather was in a generous mood. He had already built the greatest empire in the known world, larger even than the one that Alexander had ambitiously sought to create through conquest. And his big heart was further softened when he fell in love with the daughter of the leader of that giant enemy force.’

Ashoka and Radhagupta exchanged a glance. Both knew whom their guru was speaking of. Seleucus Nicator, father of Apama, satrap of the armies of Alexander that had been left behind to administer the territories conquered by the late Macedonian emperor. The satrap had since become an emperor in his own right; though he retained the token title of satrap, his territories were known as the Seleucid Empire now.

‘But the Khorasanis hate the Greeks.’

‘Politics makes enemies friends, if only for a while.’

Ashoka absorbed this. Khorasan, Seleucus Nicator ... he groaned. ‘My head hurts. I wish she would only pick up a sword and attack openly. All this subterfuge is so complicated and confusing.’

Kautilya looked sombre. ‘The sword will come soon enough. But it will not be held in her hand. Nor will it come at you openly. But nevertheless it will come soon, when you least expect it, and from the most unexpected direction. Watch your back, Ashoka. And watch every side as well.’

ELEVEN

Ashoka and Radhagupta rode back in silence to Pataliputra. The sun was still low in the morning sky, but to Ashoka it felt like the day was already ending. A dusky quiet lay over the jungle pathway as their mounts trotted leisurely, picking their way through the wooded path. Kautilya had categorically rejected Ashoka's suggestion that he return with them to the city to argue on behalf of the Chandikas. 'There is nothing to be gained from arguing the inarguable.' Ashoka was deeply disappointed. He blamed himself in part for the plight of the Chandikas. It was he who had gone to them when he first heard the Confederacy assassins in the public house, he was the one who had exposed the traitor in their ranks, and he who insisted they go to his father to seek permission to search the imperial family apartments. Aside from the pain of having to kill his own lover, Chaand, even if it was in self-defence, he now faced the guilt of knowing that he had played a hand in precipitating this crisis.

Radhagupta sensed the tone of his thoughts. 'Acharya is right. You are blameless in this matter. It is not your fault that Queen Khorasan framed the Chandikas for the assassination plot. It was masterfully done. You are lucky that you did not get caught up in her web of lies and deceit too. Do not berate yourself for things you could not have anticipated or prevented.'

Ashoka maneuvered his mare around an overhanging branch, ducking low to slip beneath the clawing fingers of the bough. 'But we could still do something. The sabha session starts at noon. If only Acharya had agreed to return with us to Pataliputra.'

'Ashoka, Gurudev may not have wished to explain himself in detail about his refusal to come to the sabha, but I can tell you that he was right to do so.'

Ashoka glanced back at the young priest. 'How could he be right when he is the only one who could persuade the sabha chiefs to show clemency to the Chandikas? Without him, I stand no chance of swaying them. I have asked my mother to do what she can to delay the verdict until we return, but it will not matter now. Without Acharya to speak, nobody will listen to her or to me. Father will make his usual thundering speech, War Marshall Khorasan will lie about the evidence to cover up her daughter's plot, and the sabha chiefs will vote with their swords. The Chandikas are certain to

be exiled. Guruji could have prevented that! Only he could!’

‘Not anymore. You are thinking of Acharya Kautilya of yore. The legendary architect of Mauryavansh, the brightest light of his age. That light has long since dimmed. The sabha chiefs would shout him down deafeningly if he stood before them now. Your father would be enraged, and with good reason. The age of the brahmin is past. It is the age of kshatriyas now. The time of the sword and the warrior. Reason, logic, common sense, dharma, none of these count for much anymore. Only violence speaks, and when it opens its fanged jaws, Vishnu preserve us from destruction.’

Ashoka guided his horse carefully down a stony sloping stretch, the loose pebbles skittering underfoot. ‘I don’t accept that. He is still Kautilya! The greatest mind of all time. His time can never be past. The sabha will see that. Father will see that. They must. The Chandikas have to be saved. They do not deserve to be punished for crimes they never committed. It is injustice.’

‘There is always injustice, Ashoka. That is why we crave justice so deeply. Because there is darkness, we desire light. Injustice is the norm, it is dharma that is the exception. That is why evil proliferates and good men are so few in number. You are a good man, Ashoka. A good son and a loyal subject of Mauryavansh. But you cannot fight everyone alone. This crisis is beyond your ability to resolve. The fate of the Chandikas is no longer your responsibility or concern. Leave it be as Acharya said. Watch out for your own safety. You have made powerful enemies in the family now. You are within their ken. Like hawks they watch you now, marking your every move. Do not yield to your impulses. It will make you predictable and vulnerable. Stay aloof, resolute, mask your true emotions and intentions. Keep them wondering what you mean to do next, lead them to believe one thing, then do another instead. Show affection to your enemy and neglect your friend, so they will mistake one for the other.’

Ashoka snorted. ‘I know how the game is played. I hate the game.’

‘You are a prince of Mauryavansh, you have no choice, you were born into this game. It ends only when you end.’

Ashoka knew better than to argue the point.

They rode in silence for the next few miles. The path wound through the forest, passing close by other ashrams including the famous Kulapati Shaunaka ashrama where the sage Ugrasrava Sauti had narrated his guru’s epic poem The Mahabharata once in another age. The ashrama still flourished, each successive Maharishi taking pride in maintaining the tradition of Kulapati—literally, ‘teacher of ten thousand minds’. Ashoka

mused on the irony that an ashrama whose founder had died some thousand years earlier still enjoyed such great popularity while his own guru lived his last years in obscurity in a tiny five-hut ashram less than thirty miles away. The injustice of it infuriated him. He could not understand how people could fail to recognize the value of things that mattered, while giving importance to so many irrelevant and pointless pursuits. Wine? It was good to make one feel relaxed sometimes, but the way his siblings guzzled it down, often to such excess that they spent their waking minutes vomiting out the night's consumption, was disgusting. Sex? It was a pleasurable pastime, but the way the imperials went at it, one would think it was a necessity rather than a pleasurable indulgence. Food? Now there was a necessity, but people ate such vile things, and to such excess that it sickened him just to be in their presence. One could only eat so much. Anything more was just more shit for the gardens! In fact, no matter how lavish the feast or precious the delicacy, it was all going to turn to the same shit eventually. He enjoyed his food, especially after a hard day, or a good morning's training, or fighting, but he couldn't fathom the obsession some of his queen mothers and siblings had with procuring the rarest sweetmeats and delicacies and making a huge ceremony out of their consumption.

To sum up, he didn't understand his family. All they seemed to care about was what to wear, what to eat and drink, whom to fuck, and how they could outdo one another. But when it came to things that really mattered, like the plight of the poor who often went hungry at night, or those too maimed or crippled to work for a living, or injustices like the one facing the Chandikas, nobody seemed to care. A ruler should care. They should know what was important and what was not. They should root out injustice and stand for something. Not merely spend their lives in a stupor of intoxicated ecstasy and excess.

He was still fuming and seething when the sound of approaching hooves distracted him. Radhagupta had already stopped and was staring intently, trying to see the approaching riders. Ashoka reined in his mare and placed his palm flat on the trunk of a walnut tree. 'Soldiers, from Pataliputra.'

'How could you possibly know that from a tree?'

'Three riders, coming fast, strong fresh horses. They can't be brahmins riding to one of the forest ashramas. So I assume they're soldiers sent to fetch us for some reason.'

He waited, letting the mare chew on some dewy grass. The riders came in sight a few moments later, reining in as they caught sight of Ashoka and Radhagupta.

Ashoka recognized one of the men from his riding stance when he was a hundred yards away. Dwadesh, his training partner. As they came close enough to show their faces, he recognized the other two as well, also from his morning training sessions in the yards. They were young boys, novices in training.

They drew up before him, saluting smartly. ‘Prince Ashoka. Your brother has sent for you.’

‘You will have to be a little more specific. I have a lot of brothers.’

Dwadesh grinned, glancing at his companions. ‘First prince Sushim.’

‘I’m on my way back to the palace. I’ll see him there.’ Ashoka took up his reins.

Dwadesh held up his hand. ‘Prince Sushim has already left the palace, he’s on his way.’

‘On his way where?’ This conversation was irritating Ashoka. He had just been fuming about his brothers and their excesses. Sushim was the worst of them. First in every respect: debauchery, excess, addiction, wastefulness, assholery. The last thing he wanted to hear about was his spoiled arrogant brother’s travel plans.

‘To Girvan. To hunt.’

That was typical of Sushim. When he wasn’t fornicating, feasting, hosting dog fights and other animal or human-abusive blood sports, he was off to the jungle, returning home with wagonloads of slaughtered beasts.

‘So?’

‘He has asked for you to join him.’

Ashoka snorted. ‘I have no time to waste hunting with Sushim. He can slaughter deer and rabbits on his own. I am headed back to Pataliputra. Now, if you could move from my path, my companion and I will continue on our way. The sabha session begins at noon and I have things to do before that.’

Dwadesh glanced at his companions, then at Radhagupta. ‘Yuvraj,’ he said, using the proper Sanskrit title for a prince—literally, ‘young king’. ‘It is not a request, it is an order.’

Ashoka stared at the young soldier. ‘An order? Since when do I take orders from my own brother? When he’s emperor he can order the whole empire, but until then, he has no authority over me.’

Dwadesh nodded, showing that he agreed with Ashoka but also apologizing for arguing the point further. ‘The order comes not from Yuvraj Sushim but from the Samrat.’ He used the formal Sanskrit term for Emperor, once again underlining that he was conveying official orders. ‘Samrat Bindusara himself instructed War Marshall Khorasan to send out a

party to escort you to the site of Yuvraj Sushim's hunting expedition.'

'War Marshall Khorasan? Is it a hunting expedition or a war party?'

'Since the Chandikas are no longer on duty, the security of the imperial family is now the war marshall's responsibility.'

'That is as per protocol,' Radhagupta said. 'You should abide by the imperial order.'

Ashoka felt like laughing but the laughter would have been a bitter outburst. 'An imperial order to attend a hunting expedition? The war marshall sending out an escort to ensure I go along? Is that protocol too, Radhagupta?'

The young brahmin offered no reaction. 'The imperial family did face a major crisis yesterday. The emperor is only doing what he must to ensure their safety.'

Ashoka read between the lines of Radhagupta's noncommittal response. The brahmin had been trained in politics by the inventor of diplomacy himself. He was advising Ashoka not to express himself too freely in criticism of his father or imperial protocol. Ashoka understood the wisdom in that but he felt frustrated by this unexpected development. 'I need to attend the sabha session. I was the one who discovered the Confederacy assassins and the Chandika spy, I am a key witness in the trial. My attendance there is more important than accompanying my brother on one of his——' he paused. He had been about to say slaughter fests. He amended that now. '—hunting expeditions.'

Dwadesh nodded as if he had anticipated this argument. 'The war marshall said to inform you that the trial today would be a closed session. Only essential persons are to attend. You are not on the list of attendees.'

Ashoka stared blankly at the soldier, reminding himself that he was only the bearer of the news, not the issuer. 'That makes no sense at all. I have to be there! I was a first-hand witness. I saw things, I heard things—I killed three conspirators myself. They need to hear from me before taking any decision.'

Dwadesh spread his hands. 'Yuvraj ... Ashoka. We have trained together, played together. You are the only prince we,' he inclined his head to indicate his companions, 'consider a true friend. Everyone admires you hugely for the way you dealt with the assassination plot. We all feel for the Chandikas and what they're going through. But this is beyond you now. The Emperor, war marshall, sabha chiefs, they have their own ideas on how to deal with the situation and they aren't going to listen to you or anyone else.'

'I can make them listen.' Ashoka tempered his tone, appealing to

Dwadesh's friendly overture. 'You know me well enough to know that I am a friend of the common soldier. The Chandikas were only doing their job. They should not be punished for it. The traitor in their order was an exception, and she is dead now. The rest of them are blameless.'

'Ashoka,' Dwadesh said. 'My friend and I, we split off from the main party and rode ahead, just so we could warn you. The main escort party is only a few more minutes behind us, they will be here at any time. They are heavily armed and have orders to escort you to the hunting site, using whatever force necessary. You can't fight them. You can't challenge an imperial order. You can't battle your way alone into the sabha session, War Marshall Khorasan has ten thousand soldiers guarding the city and the palace right now, with another forty thousand on call in the city barracks. This is not the time to challenge the power of Pataliputra. Come with us, we will take you straight to the hunting site, we'll get there ahead of the main escort if we move right now. You can avoid any conflict or unpleasantness.'

Dwadesh ended his long appeal by holding out an open hand to Ashoka. It was a gesture of friendship and support, of respect and affection. Ashoka looked at the young soldier's face and then at his companions, finally at Radhagupta.

Radhagupta inclined his bald head, concurring.

Ashoka took Dwadesh's hand and pressed it in acceptance and thanks. Dwadesh's eyes flashed a relieved smile. His companions relaxed and sighed as well. That response showed Ashoka how close he had come to risking everything. Without another word of protest, he turned the head of his horse and jerked his head to indicate that the soldier should lead the way.

There is a time to fight, and a time to think. This is a time to think, not fight.

TWELVE

Queen Shubhadraṅgi and Queen Tissyanka were greeted by a number of sharp looks when they walked into the sabha hall together. A small flurry ensued among the Khorasani guards who were stationed at the doorways and throughout the large chamber. Tissyanka reached out, took hold of her sister Queen's hand, and squeezed it tightly. Shubhadraṅgi smiled back at her. She was grateful for Tissyanka's company. This was one occasion where she did not wish to be alone. She had a feeling she was going to be isolated enough as it was. The imperial palace had been buzzing all morning with word on the sabha session. There had been closed door meetings amongst several groups of sabha chiefs all night and all this morning as well. There hadn't been such excitement around a sabha session in years. Something big was coming and the sinking feeling in her belly told her it was not going to be a very good something.

'Queen Shubhadraṅgi, Queen Tissyanka.'

The words were curtly spoken in a Khorasani accent. Even before she turned around, Shubhadraṅgi knew the speaker from the tone itself. However adamant the Khorasani guards may be, they dared not address a queen curtly. She turned to see, as expected, the weathered face of War Marshall Jezza Khorasan.

'This is a closed session of the sabha. You are not permitted to attend. I will have you escorted out at once.' She turned away and gestured to two Khorasani guards who hurried forward, spears held in the resting position, points aimed upwards.

'Most certainly not,' Queen Tissyanka said, equally curt. 'We are fully authorized to be here.'

'Yes, we are,' Shubhadraṅgi added, her heart thudding.

War Marshall Khorasan looked at both of them in turn, taking her time. 'Queens are not permitted to attend this session. Even if you were, the queens' gallery is up there.' She raised the hilt of her baton to indicate the upper galleries, the gesture serving to also remind them that the baton was a sign of her right to enforce the law by any means necessary. Shubhadraṅgi had seen her beating one of her own soldiers who had dozed off on duty once; it had not been a pretty sight. 'You have no place here in the main sabha hall.'

‘Where else are sabha chiefs supposed to sit during the session?’ Shubhadraṅgi heard herself ask, pleased at the calmness of her own voice despite her thudding heart.

Jezza Khorasan blinked once. ‘Sabha chiefs?’

‘Yes.’ Tissyanka’s voice was a little more breathy than normal, but still calm. ‘We are here representing our respective kingdoms. I am here as sabha chief of Tissar.’

‘And I as sabha chief of Sapramelu.’

The war marshall looked at each of them in turn. Her leathery features betrayed no emotion, but her small grey eyes were focused now, whereas earlier they had been roving the hall, more concerned with her duties managing the security than with two trespassing queens. ‘She’s taking us seriously now, that’s for certain,’ Shubhadraṅgi contemplated.

‘I see.’ Jezza Khorasan’s tone suggested that she didn’t see at all, and what she saw, she didn’t like. She turned her gaze to Tissyanka. ‘Queen Tissyanka, your father is Chief of the Tissar nation.’

‘And in his absence, I am the next in line of succession. He is unable to attend due to a pressing situation in our home kingdom. I am here in his stead. The Tissar seat is right over there, in the third row—’

‘Yes, I am aware of the seating allocations. Queen Shubhadraṅgi, is your father also unable to attend this session?’

‘My father is dead.’ She was looking at Khorasan’s face when she said it and saw no reaction. The war marshall was well aware that she was an orphan; it was her job as war marshall to know the heads and line of succession of every single one of the five hundred kingdoms. She’s deliberately taunting you by pretending you don’t matter enough for her to remember your family. Don’t rise to the bait. ‘My aunt serves as queen of the kingdom, and yes, she is unable to attend this session, which leaves me as the highest ranking member of the Sapremalu Tribe and Kingdom to attend—’

War Marshall Khorasan turned away before Shubhadraṅgi could finish speaking. Without another word, she walked away, the two guards going with her. Shubhadraṅgi and Tissyanka watched as the tall gaunt woman moved through the crowds of sabha chiefs milling about the vast hall.

Tissyanka made a face. ‘Well, that’s over.’

Let’s take our places. The session is about to start.’

They moved through the crowd together, hearing snatches of conversation on all sides as they sought out their respective seats. They were several rows and seats apart, unfortunately, but because of the circular arrangement of the seating, Shubhadraṅgi was pleased to see that

she could turn her head and see her friend anytime she wished. She turned to squeeze Tissyanka's hand one last time before they parted. Most of the sabha chiefs were male, perhaps a 3:1 ratio, which was typical, since many of the newer tribal kingdoms favoured patriarchal rule over the traditional matriarchy of the subcontinent. These men were almost always large, hairy, bearded, smelly and rude, even arrogant. She was jostled hard several times and once felt a probing hand seeking to find a suitable place to pinch her from behind—she had been prepared for such behaviour and caught the offending fingers, twisting them back hard enough to feel a knuckle crack. The owner of the fingers swore behind her and then cursed again as he backed into another, taller man, the top of his head connecting with the other chief's jaw. She smiled as the two men exchanged abuses in their respective dialects, not bothering to look back at either one. She took her seat without further disturbance and sighed. It had been a very long time since she had attended a sabha session as a delegate. She liked the sudden gush of responsibility and power but wished she was doing so under less gruelling circumstances.

‘Attention! Attention! The Emperor is in the sabha!’

The criers called out the alert in high speech Sanskrit, repeating it in the Sanskrit-derivative common speech Pali and Prakrit dialects. The bustle of the sabha hall quietened as the chiefs turned to watch the imperial convoy enter from the guarded entrance that led directly to the Emperor's Box. The Box itself was a canopied hexagonal wooden podium overlooking the sabha hall. Half a dozen Khorasani guards took up positions at the six points, armed with bows and arrows, each with an arrow already in hand, ready to loose at the sign of any aggression. Three additional guards guarded the Emperor's sides and rear, armed with drawn swords. War Marshall Khorasan herself stood directly below the podium on the sabha floor, her piercing gray eyes sweeping the hall in search of any suspicious movement or behavior. The galleries above the hall, usually reserved for queens and wives of chiefs, were empty of spectators, but Shubhadra glimpted the black and red uniforms of Khorasani guards positioned there, pointing throwing spears down at the five hundred chiefs. Was such intense scrutiny really necessary? Surely Bindusara was not expecting one of the chiefs to attack him right here in the hall!

‘Are you afraid of us now?’ This was shouted by a bearded giant of a man. She couldn't tell which tribe he was from but it was one of the western kingdoms, judging from the way he wore his anga vastra and dhoti, and the caste marks on his forehead. ‘Do you think we are the enemy?’

Bindusara ignored the chief as he took his seat on the throne, adjusting his posture to suit his comfort. 'In the past few days, we have been betrayed. The security of Pataliputra was compromised by those we trusted the most. The assassination plot had deep connections in the imperial palace itself. War Marshall Khorasan's security measures are intended to protect us from any further attack.' Without looking at the western chief who was still standing in place, awaiting an answer to his challenge, Bindusara continued in a hard tone. 'Anyone who challenges us at this time of crisis, is against us. All threats to Mauryavansh will be dealt with swiftly and conclusively. We were betrayed once. It will not be permitted to happen again. Either stand with us, or die opposing us. The choice is yours.'

He let the words sink in.

After a brief hesitation, the challenger took his seat again. But Shubhadraangi saw War Marshall Khorasan looking pointedly at one of her lieutenants standing near his row and signaling in some kind of code, giving her subordinate an instruction. The Khorasani lieutenant nodded once, acknowledging the order, and positioned herself in such a manner that the offending heckler would have to pass her in order to exit the hall after the session. Shubhadraangi guessed that the chief in question would have to answer some stern questions about his loyalty to the empire before he was allowed to leave the imperial grounds that day.

She exchanged a glance with Tissyaanka who shook her head slightly while fluttering her eyelashes, a reaction which Shubhadraangi knew meant "What is happening?" She was wondering the same thing herself.

'The events of the past days have made us aware of the shortcomings in our security arrangements. The Lichchavi assassination attempt was a bold, brash effort to challenge the supremacy of Mauryavansh. The Confederacy of Lichchavi Tribes were foolish not to have joined the Empire during the time of consolidation. Now, they have dared to attack our sovereignty openly. This leads us with no alternative. This kind of behaviour cannot be tolerated or permitted to occur again. An example must be made of them and quickly. Our first order of business is to launch a war campaign to end all resistance in the Confederate tribes and integrate their lands into the Mauryavansh Empire. War Marshall Khorasan shall lead the 9th Akshohini herself in this campaign. It will be a short, sharp deployment. She estimates that it will take no more than one masa to crush all resistance in the Confederacy and assert our sovereignty over their territories.'

Shubhadraangi glanced around covertly, examining the faces and

reactions of the chiefs within easy sight of her position. As she swivelled her gaze, she sensed a pair of eyes watching her and cut back just in time to see the war marshall watching her. The Khorasani general's grey eyes bored with a disturbing intensity into Shubhadra's face for a moment before passing on. Shubhadra felt her skin crawl with unease. She restricted her observances to whatever she could see just by moving her eyes around, keeping her posture and head as still as possible. Every single other chief she saw was doing the same, she noted. She wondered how many took an exception to being scrutinized as intently by Jezza Khorasan, and had adjusted their behaviour accordingly.

'Let us put the battle campaign for acquisition of Confederacy Territories to a vote now. On the matter of Mauryavansh ending resistance from Lichchavi Confederacy rebels and using military action to integrate the Confederacy tribes into the Empire, how say you?'

The ensuing thump startled Shubhadra even though she knew that voting was always done by slapping one's hand down on the table once. The combined echo of five hundred chiefs slamming down their meaty palms on their tables made a deafening sound, like a sal tree trunk cracking in a river. She moved her hand belatedly, miming the action of voting in favour and hoping that her slowness hadn't been noted. She had reservations about the methods Jezza Khorasan would use against innocent civilians in the Confederacy tribes who might not have anything to do with the assassination plot or the conspiracy, but on the overall question of how to deal with the threat, she was completely in agreement with Bindusara. Those assassins had sought to infiltrate her house, to kill her family. She had no qualms about voting to do what was needed to prevent them from launching any further attempts.

'Those in dissent?'

Bindusara waited. Shubhadra did not want to turn her head to examine the rows behind her, but from what she could see, not a single hand was raised to challenge the vote.

'Unanimously passed: The campaign is approved and War Marshall Khorasan is authorized to proceed as she sees fit. Mauryavansh anticipates your success, Chief Khorasan.'

Remaining exactly where she was, the war marshall replied. 'I shall bring you the heads of those who plotted against us and the territories of the Confederacy, within the allotted time.' She did not pause her scrutiny of the sabha hall as she spoke these words. She might as well have been saying thank you and good day to someone in passing on a city street.

Bindusara continued. 'Our next order of business concerns the Order of

the Chandikas. As you all know by now, the Order was created in my father's time to protect the Emperor and the imperial family against any threat. It served him well and continued to serve its function for some time after his passing. But as recent events have shown, that long tradition has been irreparably damaged by the betrayal of its members and their treasonous actions against our imperial safety. These were not dissident tribes seeking to attack us, they were the very persons we trusted with our own security turning against us. When a dog bites the hand that feeds it, no matter how long and loyal that dog's service, it must be put down at once. There is no forgiving or condoning such treason and betrayal. The Chandikas must be dealt with swiftly and decisively. They must be given the same punishment that any treasonous traitor would expect. No special treatment or excuses can be made for their unconscionable actions. The verdict I propose for them is mass execution, said sentence to be carried out at once, in full view of the public as an example of how Mauryavansh deals with traitors and assassins.'

'Your Excellency!'

Shubhadrang's heart stopped as the voice rang out. It was her own voice, speaking loudly and plaintively. She felt every pair of eyes in the sabha turn to look at her incredulously. She knew that the war marshall was staring at her too. And that more than one of the bows and spears of the Khorasani guards were now trained upon her chest, ready to loose at the slightest hint of any sign of aggression. She was careful to keep her tone neutral, her voice level. She knew she had to speak out, but she had no wish to earn an arrow or a spear through her heart as a penalty for saying the wrong thing or using the wrong tone of voice.

Bindusara lowered his gaze to focus on her. She saw his eyes flicker as he saw her for the first time amidst the sea of five hundred faces. She knew from that flicker that he was not pleased by her presence but did not want to let his irritation show to the rest of the sabha. She kept her features composed and her voice calm. 'What of the trial of the Chandikas?'

The instant she had spoken, she wished she could rephrase the question. She had tried to be as brief as possible, knowing that the more she spoke, the more it would be construed as a challenge. But what came out sounded too terse to her own ears. She had voiced it evenly, intending it to merely be a question rather than an argument. But hearing it echo in the sabha hall, she understood that there was no question that was not an argument. The very act of asking it made it a challenge. Inwardly she cringed, but there was nothing she could do about it now. The question was out there.

Bindusara took a moment to draw in a deep breath, glancing down at his

table as if referring to some scroll or other object that was of pressing importance. There was no such object or scroll but she understood that he was using the pause to give himself the opportunity to control the rebuke he would have given anyone else.

‘A trial would be superfluous in the face of such overwhelming evidence. War Marshall Khorasan has investigated all the facts of the matter, examined all witnesses and suspects, and her conclusions are inarguable. The Chandikas committed treason, conspired against the Empire and plotted to assassinate one or more members of the imperial family. Even if there had been any doubt of their guilt, which is not the case, as Emperor I possess the authority to issue a summary command to execute without waiting for the sabha’s ratification. This was not a political decision. It is a simple matter of self-defence. They threatened my family, they pose a continuing threat to my family, and as such, I have the right to end that threat immediately in the interests of self-preservation.’

He paused and looked at her sharply. ‘And since it is you, Second Queen Shubhadra, who poses the question to me, perhaps I might remind you that you yourself are part of that same family, and as such, facing the same threat from these assassins.’

Shubhadra hesitated. Bindusara had already composed himself again to his patented wooden face, revealing no further emotion. She knew that her question had been stoutly answered and that his response was beyond any further argument. She sensed Tisyanika watching her with an expression of concern, openly worried for her now. She knew she should shut up and be still and not draw attention to herself again.

But Ashoka had told her to delay the proceedings until he arrived, or for as long as she possibly could. It was important to him. Very important. He would probably be back at any moment. Perhaps he was making his way up through the imperial complex even now, and would be entering the sabha hall any instant. He had come to her asking for her help in this matter and she had to give it. She had not expected there to be no trial or for the sabha session to be little more than a ratification of decisions already made by Bindusara. And by War Marshall Khorasan, this had her mark all over it. A trial would have allowed the sabha chiefs to raise any questions they had about the evidence or the witnesses. That was the normal process of justice, as laid down by Acharya Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* laws. She had not expected there to be no trial at all, no due process, merely a sentencing by the Emperor. It would not be possible for her to prolong this much longer. But she could not simply sit quiet after asking just one question. She had to say something, do something to delay

this proceeding until Ashoka came.

‘Your Excellency, it is as a member of the imperial family that I speak. As you know, it was my son Ashoka who uncovered the assassination plot and the conspiracy, and drew the attention of the Chandikas to it. He even killed two of the Confederacy assassins himself. And later, when he discovered that one of the Chandikas was involved in the conspiracy, he was quick to summarily execute her on the spot.’

Bindusara was glaring at her, not just looking, or staring. He was making his displeasure plain for all to see. ‘The Second Prince served the Empire well. Now, if you have finished singing his praises, we shall proceed with the business of the sabha.’

‘Pardon my asking, Your Excellency, but is it not the business of the sabha to inquire for ourselves into the details of this conspiracy?’

‘Details?’ Bindusara’s forehead creased with a matting of irritation.

‘The Chandikas are an old and venerated order, trusted by your father and yourself for over half a century. They live to serve the imperial family and the Empire. How were they corrupted and why? Surely understanding the causes behind their betrayal can only help us prepare ourselves against such lapses in years to come. It is for the purpose of educating ourselves that I ask these questions. That is my only intention.’

‘To educate yourself.’ Bindusara’s tone was sceptical and impatient. ‘If you wish, you may consult with War Marshall Khorasan at her convenience and educate yourself on all the trivial details of the matter. For now, the sabha has important business to conclude and cannot indulge your petty curiosities.’

His tone said everything his words left out, casting the implication that she was asking these things only because she was, of course, a woman.

Shubhadraangi knew better than to be irritated by that chauvinism; but she did take it as a sign of his impatience with her speaking out of turn yet again. It was his way of saying shut up now, or I will stop treating you as my wife and start treating you as I would any other chief here. The reference to seeing War Marshall Khorasan was a veiled threat, and she knew it but she was desperate now. None of this was going as she’d expected. She’d known it would not be easy to keep the session going till Ashoka came, but she had not been expecting to expose herself to a charge of treason just for asking a question or three.

She tried frantically to think of something else to say that would not sound offensive, challenging or threatening to his male ego. She could not. Her mind was a blank. Already she was aware that several sabha chiefs were staring at her, some leering as they watched what they probably

thought was a domestic quarrel being enacted in public. She could almost imagine the boorish thoughts that were going through their thick skulls: 'Emperor of Mauryavansh but he can't rule his wife outside the bed chamber.' She didn't care about that. Men were men, to hell with them. She cared about doing what Ashoka had asked her to do. But there were no more questions left to ask, no more ploys left that would delay the sabha session any further.

Bindusara was about to continue when a female voice spoke up unexpectedly, interrupting him yet again.

'Who will take their place?'

Shubhadra's eyes cut to where Tissya was seated, at the Tissa table. Her sister queen had come to her rescue. She could hug Tissya! Suddenly, the attention that had been focused on her shifted across the hall to the Tissa table. Shubhadra was instantly forgotten. There was good reason for that. While Shubhadra came from a small, almost-non-existent tribe with no real power, influence, wealth or military strength, just a few handfuls of families scattered across Jambudwipa, Tissa was a nation of some importance. A substantial treasury with a steady, even good income from taxes and trade earnings, and a sizeable military force. Wealth and power, the two things that mattered to anyone in this hall, were always more interesting than domestic differences.

Tissya's question was a good one too, better than anything Shubhadra would have thought of. She was still thinking like Ashoka, looking to delay or derail the sentencing of the Chandikas. Tissya had taken an altogether different tack. By asking who would replace the Chandikas she had moved past the topic of the trial, avoided questioning the Emperor on his lack of due process, and simply posed a relevant question that showed respect for his judgement and enquired what he had planned next.

Bindusara turned to look at Tissya, the criss-cross matting on his forehead easing. 'The Khorasani guard are the best qualified for the task. I have decided to appoint them as the imperial guard with immediate effect.' He gestured, indicating the Khorasani guards already posted around the sabha hall. 'They shall act as personal bodyguards to the imperial family as well as protect the capitol, to ensure that any further attempts against Mauryavansh are quashed before they become a threat.' He continued to address Tissya but his next words were clearly intended for Shubhadra. 'We must ensure that our enemies never dare to even think of Pataliputra as a nesting ground. And the way to do that is to make the city inhospitable to all such enemies. Better to crush the serpent's eggs in

the nest rather than wait for the cobra to rear up and strike.'

This last was a quote from Acharya Kautilya himself, and Shubhadraangi understood that it was intended to drive home the point that both the long-retired guru, and his young protege, her and Bindusara's son, were ineffectual in preventing this crisis from befalling them, while he, Bindusara, would not let that happen in future.

Tissyanka said nothing further. Shubhadraangi did not expect her to either. She had done more than Shubhadraangi could've imagined. She had spoken out and helped delay the session another few moments, as well as diverted the sabha and Emperor's attention away from Shubhadraangi.

'Enough talk. It is time to end this menace once and for all. I pronounce judgement upon the treacherous Chandika order. For their crime of treason, conspiracy and betrayal of their oaths, they are sentenced to mass execution, said sentence to be carried out at once. I now ask that the sabha move to the Viewing Gallery, to observe and bear witness to the carrying out of this same sentence. This sabha session concludes now. Thank you each and every one for your attendance and your support. Mauryavansh stands on the backs of we five hundred kingdoms. Divided, we were strong nations. United, we are the world's greatest Empire. Mauryavansh!'

With one voice came the response, roared aloud by five hundred throats. 'MAURYAVANSH!'

Shubhadraangi felt a pair of eyes boring into her. She turned to see Jezza Khorasan. The war marshall met her gaze and held it a moment, just long enough to make it clear that she was sending a message to Shubhadraangi. I see you now.

THIRTEEN

‘Ashoka!’

Sushim had a way of saying a name that made it sound like an obscenity. Not just his name, any name. Ashoka had even heard him address his mother queens in the same tone. But not our father; him, he speaks to with complete deference, like pouring honey. One of Acharya Kautilya’s many lessons in politics had centered on the different types of rulers and their personality types. One of them he had termed the Prince of Postures. That was Sushim, described to perfection. He knew how to posture for different occasions and audiences.

Right now, he was posturing for a gaggle of young beautiful nubile and rakish clingers. Ashoka supposed it was his usual entourage of aristocratic hangers on from the richest and most powerful families of Pataliputra. He recognized none of them because he never attended any aristocratic functions or social gatherings. Avoided them, in point of fact. He recognized their type from their appearance, their attire and their attitude, but not the individual Houses from which each spoiled brat had ensued. To Sushim, this was his usual gang. He was enjoying strutting about the camp, acting like he was Emperor of Mauryavansh, lording it over his court. Sushim was gifted with a striking resemblance to their father and he made the most of it, mimicking Bindusara’s physical mannerisms, attire, expressions, tone of voice, even his phrases. Age differences apart, he could almost pass for Bindusara in the dark. And he used that to the hilt, especially when it came to his nightly activities. Sushim and Ashoka, standing side by side, were as unlikely to be mistaken for brothers as Bindusara and Ashoka were for father and son. This fact had never troubled Ashoka before, but now, as every young man and woman in the clearing looked at him and several whispered to each other, he found himself gritting his teeth and wishing he had never been born into this family at all. The spoiled young lords and ladies made no pretence of their disapproval of his dishevelled, road-dusty appearance, his rough clothes, or his even rougher looks. But he knew that it was the lack of resemblance to the imperial profile and features that made them preen and bristle the most.

He was sure before this hunt was over, he would hear more than one

insensitive comment about whether his mother had slept with the right Bindusara on the night he was conceived, the implication being that perhaps the rumours were true and he was in fact conceived by his legendary guru Kautilya himself. Ashoka had grown a thick skin to such insults, because they weren't actually insults: it was commonplace for the royal preceptor to act as a surrogate to father children upon the queens of his king. It was untrue in Ashoka's case, and in the case of all his siblings. Bindusara had many shortfalls as a parent; being able to father children had never been one of them. But he knew that reacting to such rumours and assumptions would only stoke them further. As his guru had taught him, people reacted most violently to insults which contained some element of truth. If he over-reacted to the ceaseless comments about his lack of resemblance to his father, he would only give the gossip mills more grain to grind into flour.

'Brother.' He spoke the single word in place of a name. Sushim was his brother, he could not deny that, much as he wished it were not true. But the act of saying his name felt unclean, knowing all that he did about Sushim's appetites and offences.

Sushim spread his arms wide in a parody of a warm greeting. Ashoka allowed the taller, broader boy to pretend to embrace him in a show of brotherly affection. He smelled the familiar wine breath and other substances Sushim had abused in the past several hours.

'My brother, saviour of Mauryavansh!' Sushim clapped him hard on his shoulder blades, the blow intended to throw Ashoka off-balance and cause him to stumble. Ashoka was prepared for it, standing with his legs wide enough apart and his body turned at an angle. Sushim's hand struck Ashoka's shoulder blade, making him wince and wring his hand, while Ashoka didn't budge an inch. Sushim recovered quickly and reeled off his litany with his usual mocking flourish. 'The ... man of the hour. Slayer of assassins. Exposer of conspiracies. Destroyer of the Confederacy. Champion of Pataliputra!'

Ashoka leaned into him, speaking just loud enough to be heard by Sushim but not anyone else. 'I can't stay, Brother. I have pressing business elsewhere.'

'Now the hunt will truly be entertaining!' Sushim continued aloud. 'Ashoka is the finest tracker and hunter in the empire.' Tilting his head, he said for Ashoka's ears: 'Father said you are not to be seen in Pataliputra till he sends for you. The Khorasani guard will bar you if you try to enter the city.'

Ashoka didn't waste time arguing this point, or asking what he had done

to merit being banned from his own home—especially since he was supposedly the saviour of Mauryavansh, champion of Pataliputra, etc, etc. He had anticipated Sushim's argument. 'Not the city, Brother. Elsewhere.'

Sushim looked at him curiously, his handsome face creasing at the forehead in a matted pattern that resembled their father's mannerism. 'What business?'

Ashoka winked. 'The female kind.'

Sushim's eyes widened and eyebrows shot up. 'Really? Who is she? Is she from one of the Five Hundred Houses? Have I had her yet?' He waved himself down. 'If she's from the Five Hundred and is worth having, I've probably had her already. Or even if she's not worth having.'

Ashoka forced himself to keep the smile on his face, instead of punching his brother in the nose as he longed to do. 'You don't know her. She's not from the Five Hundred or from any of the high Houses. She's from the country.'

At the mention of the non-metropolitan world, Sushim's face twisted in an expression of disgust. 'A commoner? How can you stand to even touch such vermin? Really, Brother. You are a prince of Pataliputra. You have standards. There is a protocol. If not yourself, at least think about the family's reputation.'

Ashoka shrugged. 'The heart wants what the heart wants. She's quite a tasty morsel.' He forced himself to wink again, playing the part up.

Sushim looked less disgusted, even thoughtful, but shook his head. 'Even if she was from the highest Houses, it wouldn't matter. You are to stay with me, by my side, until Father sends for us both. His orders were very precise. He even stationed the Khorasani guard to watch over us on the expedition.'

Sushim gestured across the clearing. Ashoka had already noted the unusually strong presence of soldiers. He now noted that they were all Khorasani, and there appeared to be enough of them to crush a minor uprising.

He also saw that a sizeable number were watching him intently, hands on the hilts of their weapons, ready to draw. That was odd. If their purpose was to protect the princes, they ought to be watching everyone else. The way they were focused on him, watching his every move, suggested that they regarded him as a potential threat. He glanced back and saw that his horse had been taken in hand by the Khorasani soldiers and the three young soldiers and Radhagupta were standing off to one side, virtually ignored. There was clearly some agenda here but he knew better than to overreact. The assassination plot had disturbed the delicate equilibrium of

palace politics and it was natural enough for every person involved in the attempt to be kept under close watch for a while. Acharya Kautilya had explained the logic to him: The best way for an assassin or traitor to get close to his target was to pretend to be a hero. A champion can go where a mere stranger can never hope to penetrate. Killing off one's own associates and pretending to expose a conspiracy plot was often the opening gambit to a more complex series of moves, ending with an assassination, a coup, or a number of similar objectives.

Sushim sipped his wine, watching Ashoka as he took stock of the situation. 'You see how it is, Ashoka.' He grinned, taking a lighter tone. 'Don't be grim, Brother. We will have a feast and a grand hunt and you can go find your tasty morsel and fuck her afterwards.' He gestured grandly. 'You can have your pick of this litter for now. Any of these vixen will spread their legs for the Second Prince, Champion of Mauryavansh, Saviour of Pataliputra ...'

Ashoka tuned him out. He had heard enough of Sushim's chauvinistic, misogynistic gibberish before to fill in the blanks. He came to terms with the central message: He was under scrutiny for a few days, until the situation in Pataliputra was stabilized and any loose threads remaining had been unravelled and followed back to their source. The sabha session was probably over by now anyway, as it was well past noon. It infuriated him to think of the fate of the Chandikas. Exiled? Disgraced? Some senior leaders sent to the Torture Palace, executed even? He wanted to be there in the sabha hall right now, to do what he could to prevent such injustice. But he had no choice. Attempting to fight a hundred Khorasani and race back to Pataliputra to face several thousand more was pointless. He would only incriminate himself with his actions, making everyone assume that he was guilty by association, or worse. That would not help the Chandikas. It might even hurt them further. He squared his shoulders, drawing a deep breath and releasing it slowly. Whatever happened to the Chandikas was out of his hand now. He would have to play along with this charade, spending the days hunting and pretending to feast with his brother and these empty-headed High House brats until the storm passed. It would pass. Acharya Kautilya had taught him that. No matter how tempestuous or destructive, a storm always passed. It was the way of things.

FOURTEEN

‘Rani Shubhadraangi.’

She turned to see the familiar face of Radhagupta, the young pupil of Acharya Kautilya, and a friend of Ashoka.

‘Radhagupta. How good to see you.’

Her warmth was sincere. The young brahmin was a valuable link to the old Acharya and one person she always knew she could trust in the brahmin caucus. He was also a very likeable young man, erudite, well read in the classics, intelligent enough to discuss or debate points of philosophy or science, and a man she could spend time with openly without the other queens gossiping.

He glanced around quickly. ‘Could we speak in private? I have news of Ashoka.’

‘Of course.’ They were in the corridor outside the sabha hall. The chiefs were still milling about, the mood sombre and guarded. They were to proceed to the viewing gallery in a few moments to witness the carrying out of the sentences, but they had just enough time to step out and have a quick private exchange.

She led him away from the crowded corridor, waving to catch Tissayanka’s eye. The other queen left the person she was talking with and followed them quickly. They passed through an antechamber which led to several doors. Shubhadraangi spotted the bright blue afternoon sky and led them through a door which opened onto a balcony. The balcony overlooked the rear of the imperial complex, and looked down onto a sheer drop of several hundred feet, with walkways patrolled by sentries. Only days ago, those would have been Chandikas on those walkways; now they were all Khorasani guards. The closest walkway was over ten yards below the balcony and the nearest other balconies were several yards to either side. This was about as private as it was possible to get in this part of the palace complex.

‘How is he?’ The question was out of her mouth the moment she turned back to Radhagupta.

‘He is well, and in no immediate danger.’

She frowned. ‘Why would he be in any danger? He went to meet with Acharya Kautilya.’

‘He was detained by imperial soldiers on the way back. We both were. I was permitted to leave because I insisted I had to return to perform important religious duties here in the palace. He is still in Girvan.’

‘At the Acharya’s ashram?’ She looked puzzled.

‘No, he is in another part of Girvan. With Yuvraj Sushim’s hunting party. The soldiers were despatched to escort Ashoka there to join Sushim on his hunting expedition. He is not permitted to enter the city until recalled by the Emperor.’ Tissyanka arrived during this explanation, catching most of it.

‘I see.’ Shubhadraangi did see, quite clearly in fact. She looked at Tissyanka. ‘It was a cleverly-thought-out plan. Detain Ashoka. Avoid a trial. Push the sentencing through without giving anyone a chance to object. And now.’ She shook her head in despair. ‘This execution. It’s unbearable. Barbaric.’

Tissyanka came forward and gave Shubhadraangi a hug. She spoke just softly enough to be heard by her friend. ‘Careful, Shubha. There are ears everywhere now. Khorasani ears.’

Shubhadraangi hugged her friend back and nodded gratefully. She needed that reminder. She had always been too sensitive to accept the kind of casual brutality that was taken for granted by most queens. The thought of innocent Chandikas being executed merely to serve political expediency made her want to vomit in disgust. But she knew that expressing such feelings openly could cost her and Ashoka dearly.

She looked at Radhagupta. ‘What of his talk with Acharya Kautilya? Ashoka went to ask him to come to Pataliputra to intervene in the matter of the Chandikas.’

Radhagupta’s smooth young face softened with compassion. ‘Acharya felt it would not be wise for him to visit Pataliputra. He advised Ashoka against protesting or speaking out as well. What is to happen will happen regardless. There is no point endangering ourselves by taking a stand. It is more important to survive and look to the future.’

Shubhadraangi nodded. ‘The Acharya is wise as ever. He speaks the truth. Even I felt Ashoka was venturing out on a limb in this matter. But his heart was in the right place. Those women are innocent and what is happening to them is monstrous—’ She stopped herself. ‘But as you said, what is to happen will happen regardless. Is there any advice for me? Anything I should do to help Ashoka’s situation?’

Radhagupta shook his head slowly. ‘The Emperor is already distrustful of his involvement in the assassination plot.’

‘His involvement? All he did was expose the plot and help save us all

from the attack. Why should our husband distrust his own son for doing what any good son would do?’

‘It is standard protocol. The person exposing or intervening in a crime or assassination attempt is always assumed to have some involvement—until he is proved to be innocent. Which Ashoka certainly will be proved to be. Do not trouble yourself overly with this, my Queen.’

Tissyanka spoke up. ‘You have to admit, he and you—and I as well—have been openly questioning Bindusara’s actions and decisions. That may not have been the wisest thing to do.’

Radhagupta looked concerned. ‘Did either of you say anything at the sabha session today? I came to advise you against speaking at all. It could be taken amiss.’

‘We both spoke out during the session, to try and delay the trial. Except, there was no trial, merely a sentencing.’

Radhagupta clicked his tongue in that way brahmins had of expressing dismay. ‘I would that you had not done that, my queens. This is not a wise time to express one’s opinions in an open sabha. It is apt to attract the wrong kind of attention.’

‘And the right kind too.’

Shubhadrangi looked quizzically at Tissyanka.

Tissyanka moved closer, speaking softly even though there was no one in sight or hearing distance. No one visible, Shubhadrangi corrected herself. Who knew where and how Khorasan’s spies might be listening?

‘I was approached by two munshis. That was who I was speaking to when you called me here. They wished to set up a meeting in private with you and me, both, after the viewing.’

‘Munshis? I don’t understand. Which munshis do you mean?’ Munshi meant an accountant, though the term referred broadly to the associates—secretaries-assistants-interns-and-general-dogsbody types who hung around the sabha chiefs. Some of these men and women merely served as glorified servants, carrying scrolls, seals, sceptres, or even fetching food and running errands for their chiefs, but many were educated political experts, well versed with all aspects of Mauryavansh law, well connected to the political ups and downs of the empire—mainly through networking with their counterparts—and a few of them were bright, dangerous sparks who did all the real work while their chiefs merely pressed their seals and took credit when it was done. Shubhadrangi could not think of any reason why any munshi would want to meet with her and Tissyanka. Munshis met with other munshis, not with queens.

‘They were general munshis, available to all chiefs for any clerical work

for the sabha or otherwise. Not attached to any particular nation or chief. In this case, they were only acting as intermediaries for the persons who actually requested the meeting.'

'And who might they be?'

'I don't know. The munshis wouldn't say.'

Radhagupta nodded, approving. 'That is wise. As general munshis, they are free agents, serving no one nation. They are the ideal persons to use to convey such a request, although ...' Radhagupta squinted, thinking through all the implications. '... if they were questioned sternly they would probably give up the names of the chiefs who engaged them for this errand. So the only way to ensure absolute secrecy would be to send a blind invitation.'

'A blind invitation?'

'Where even the person conveying the invitation does not know who sent him or her.'

Shubhadrangī sighed. 'All this political doublethink gives me a headache. Are you saying that these munshis approached Rani Tissyanka without knowing who sent them? Wouldn't they know who asked them to approach her?'

'Not if they were given the instruction in writing, left at their writing station. It is common for chiefs who do not have a munshi present, or who have sent their munshis on other errands, to engage the services of a general munshi. All the chiefs—or their munshis—need to do is leave a request in writing at the writing station of a general munshi and he will carry out the request without being aware of the person who made the request. By using two separate general munshis, the person sending the request may simply be ensuring that it was delivered.'

Shubhadrangī shook her head. 'So this person is very secretive. How are we to meet this person then?'

'Persons. They will contact me again and specify a time and place. They wish you and me both to attend, Shubha.'

Shubhadrangī looked at Radhagupta. 'Would you join us? I am not accustomed to secret meetings with unknown persons. Whatever the political motivation, it would be good to have your knowledge and insight to guide us.'

Radhagupta bowed, showing Shubhadrangī his shaven head and single waist-long braid of oiled hair. 'I live to serve, Rani. It would be my pleasure.'

A disturbance from the outer chambers drew their attention.

'Shubhadrangī, the viewing must be starting. We should proceed to the

viewing gallery before we are missed and they come looking for us.'

'Indeed. We have gotten ourselves in enough trouble already today. Let's go.'

Radhagupta nodded. 'I shall see you directly tonight, my queens. Be cautious henceforth about what you say and whom you say it to. There are ears everywhere.'

Shubhadra and Tissyanka walked quickly through the antechamber. She didn't see which way Radhagupta went but when she turned the corner and glanced back he was gone. She was glad for his news. She had been anxiously waiting for Ashoka, expecting him to turn up and perhaps have an argument with his father over the Chandikas. Ashoka and Bindusara had never had a close father-son relationship. For that matter, Bindusara was not close to any of his children. His perpetual reserve kept him aloof from everyone except those he was favouring at that moment. At present, that meant Noor Khorasan and her family. But there had been a time when Shubhadra and he had been close, very close. And intimate too. She wished she could get close to him again, catch him in a moment when he was more relaxed, less reserved, not the Emperor of Mauryavansh, but simply Bindu, the man who had fallen in love with her once, had made passionate, gentle love to her, creating the wonderful person that was their son Ashoka. She was sure that Bindu would see reason, would understand that there was another way to look at the world, not as a forest of assassins seeking to exterminate you, but as a habitat filled with wild, wonderful beings all seeking to co-exist.

She followed Tissyanka out of the last door and then they were in the long verandah that went around the inner palace, surrounding and overlooking the central courtyard. This was the viewing gallery. Hundreds of other people were already gathered along the gallery—all the five hundred sabha chiefs, their spouses, munshis, other aristocrats and nobles from the Higher Houses, and who knew who else. Everyone loved an execution and this was one to beat all others. The high and mighty Chandikas themselves, defenders of Mauryavansh, confidants, protectors, and some said lovers, of the late great Chandragupta Maurya himself, now brought down low, to the very floor of the courtyard, where they would be severed from their mortal selves. The ultimate sacrifice for their Emperor.

She thought she saw expressions of gleeful anticipation on many faces. These ghoulish people! What was she doing amidst them? Why was she even here? She did not belong with them, did not condone such barbaric injustice. Yet she was compelled to attend this brutal event. Because she was a queen of Mauryavansh.

No, she corrected herself again silently.

Not because I am a queen of Mauryavansh.

Because I am a mother.

Mother of Ashoka. And the best way to protect my son is to pretend to be one of these people. Even though I'm not.

The torrent of voices rose to fever pitch, some actually gasping, whistling, cheering, and clapping their thighs, as the Chandikas were led out into the courtyard below, their dark uniforms soaked with blood and other body fluids from the abuse they must have suffered all night long. Several looked as if they were nursing grave injuries, barely able to stay upright. And yet they walked proudly, keeping their chins high, their eyes level, their faces calm. They showed no shame, no dishonour, no emotion except proud acceptance. If they were to die they would face it like the warriors they were, stoic to the very end.

Shubhadranghi choked back tears as the Khorasani guards linked up the Chandikas in rows against the courtyard walls, while Khorasani bowmen raised their longbows armed with vicious sickle-moon-headed arrows designed to do maximum damage. They aimed at the throats of the bound Chandikas. They loosed. The Chandikas sprouted arrows from their throats, blood gouting in great spurts and streams, pooling in the stones of the courtyard. They fell, their feet thrashing in death throes. War Marshall Jezza Khorasan herself appeared, carrying a great curved sword, walking along the courtyard wall, slashing at the prone bodies, delivering the final death blows, ensuring that none survived.

The executions went on for what seemed like an eternity. There were many, many Chandikas. The courtyard was awash when it was over, the stones glistening in the late afternoon sun with what, to Shubhadranghi, resembled a river of blood.

The blood of innocents.

FIFTEEN

Something was wrong.

He had sensed it that morning. The Khorasani soldiers were behaving differently. Nothing so obvious that it was easily noticeable. Minor things, such as the morning patrolling of the perimeter of the camp, which they had performed every day at dawn. But this morning there had been no patrol; instead, the guards had remained by the fireplace, hunched in their blankets. The weather had taken a cold turn and mornings were particularly biting. Ashoka had remained in his tent, but by placing his palm to the ground, he could listen to the vibrations of feet and horses and know who was going where and why. Sushim and the rest of his spoiled rich brat friends were all asleep at this hour, passed out from their nightlong feasting, carousing and fornicating. Ashoka could hear his brother's snores from the next tent, loud enough to rouse the jungle. The only people awake and about at this hour were the Khorasanis and, for some reason, they had not sent out their usual perimeter patrol.

A short while later, he understood why. A single rider approached the camp, dismounting half a mile away and walking his horse up to the east side guard campfire, fifty yards away from the main campfire. The visitor then spoke with the guards at the east side post for several minutes. Ashoka had slipped out of his tent at the sound of the approaching rider and was up in a tree, looking down at the guard post when he arrived. The visitor was also a Khorasani guard, but not one of those Ashoka had seen in the camp. He heard the conversation between the new arrival and the other guards at the east post, then the visitor turned around and left the way he had arrived, heading east by north. This time, he waited only till he was a quarter mile out before mounting his horse and riding away. A short while later, Ashoka felt the vibrations of other horses bearing riders, several dozen of them, passing north and east of the camp, heading deeper into the forest.

He waited in the tree for another hour before he was rewarded with another unusual occurrence.

The Khorasani lieutenant in charge of the camp's security gathered his captains together: three women and two men. He then proceeded to give them all detailed instructions. Ashoka had to leave the tree and creep

closer to hear what he was saying. It was worth the effort. The plan outlined by the Khorasani lieutenant was an interesting one. Ashoka admired the simplicity of it and the details such as the location and timing. He sensed War Marshall Khorasan's experienced mind behind the entire scheme. She had anticipated all contingencies and planned for them. The plan was foolproof, and there would be no escaping it alive.

The only part he wasn't able to overhear—mainly because no names were ever spoken—was the target of this plan. Someone was going to be killed, he understood that much clearly. But who and why? The why might not seem to matter right now but it could be crucial in helping determine the who. And the who definitely did matter.

He had a feeling it was likely to be himself.

It made perfect sense. Eliminate the one person who had foiled the earlier assassination attempt. Eliminate the possibility of that person interfering with future assassination attempts. Ashoka had no illusions about his importance in the larger scheme of things. To the preening daughters of the High Houses, he was the Second Prince-in-Waiting, only two steps away from the throne of Mauryavansh, the most coveted seat in the entire world. But so long as his father and Sushim lived, he was just one of a hundred sons. If they meant to kill him, it was not because of his place in the line of succession. It was because he wouldn't play their political games. Any other one of those hundred sons—well, almost any—would be easily approachable and open to a plan that involved power broking and deal making. After talking to Acharya Kautilya and ruminating on the known facts for the past several days, he was certain that the real goal of the Lichchavi Confederacy assassins had not been to assassinate anyone. The Lichchavi assassination plot had been designed to fail! That was why the two assassins had been bragging openly about the plan in a public house, within earshot of a dozen other patrons. That was why the last assassin had been eliminated, and the Chandika spy exposed. It had all been part of a larger plot. The real intention was to do away with the Chandika order itself!

By wiping out the most powerful independent military force in the imperial city, the conspirators had left the imperial palace open to a takeover. Their plan had succeeded brilliantly. If the Lichchavi assassins had actually killed any of the imperial family, that would have been acceptable too—there were plenty of them to kill after all. But to have massacred the entire family would have been a political disaster. The one hundred queens were all from the hundred most powerful kingdoms in the empire. Kill them and their families and nations would rise up in fury.

Instead, by leaving the queens alive and eliminating the Chandikas, the palace itself was now available for immediate occupancy. Khorasani guards now controlled the entire imperial palace and the capital city. Even a military coup could not have yielded such a result without a great deal of bloodshed and opposition. This way the only blood shed had been that of the innocent Chandikas, who were the only ones who could have opposed the Khorasani in their end-game: killing the Emperor himself.

Now, the Chandikas were gone. The Khorasani owned the city and the palace. And the path was clear for them to kill Bindusara whenever they pleased—or to work out an arrangement which ensured total control over the things that truly mattered to them: wealth, trade, and military power of the vast Mauryavansh empire. In time Bindusara would be killed, Ashoka was certain of that, because he was ultimately a Maurya and as such, he was emperor only because the five hundred tribes had united to support him. Khorasan, on the other hand, did not care about the empire, Chandragupta's legacy, or the *Arthashastra* laws of Acharya Kautilya that had transformed the subcontinent from a lawless land of warring tribes into a united conglomerate of integrated nations. Khorasan wanted wealth, power, control. So long as Bindusara fed these appetites, he would live and even rule, if only as a tool of the Khorasans. The moment he allowed his ego to stand in their way, foolishly believing that he was the Emperor and therefore could do as he wished, they would get rid of him. It was only a matter of time.

And to replace him, the logical choice was right here, snoring a dozen feet away from where Ashoka now lay again in his tent, fast asleep after yet another night in a long succession of nights spent indulging his most wanton, shameless appetites. It was a good pairing. Sushim didn't care about laws, the people, the empire or the throne. All he cared about was his own needs, his wants, his must-haves, his desires. So long as he got what he wanted when he wanted it, he would let them do as they pleased. An endless supply of warm bodies and cold wine and he would happily be their puppet emperor.

Which left only Ashoka as a hindrance. A thorn. An obstacle. The Ganesha in their path. The last hurdle. Kill him and their path would be open.

And they meant to do it today. Here, in the Girvan, during today's hunt.

Ashoka returned to his tent and pretended to awaken for the first time, making a show of splashing water on his face at the silver bowl, calling for a chamber pot and fresh attire and food. He had heard enough of their plan to know they intended to commit the assassination while in the forest

itself, on the hunt. His main activity these past days had been to live up to Sushim's sky-high praise of his putative talents as a tracker. Tracking meant going ahead of the main expedition, often disappearing alone into the woods for extended periods of time. It would be simple enough to attack him when he was isolated. To throw enough bodies at him from all directions, until one of their knives, or arrows, or swords, or spears struck its mark and he fell. He would be torn to shreds and his remains left for the others to discover, his death blamed on the lions of Girvan. That was the plan he had overheard, in brief.

He was ready for it.

SIXTEEN

The three cloaked figures arrived on horseback, taking the route specified. It was late and the Upper City was asleep but from the Lower City the sounds of revelry travelled on the night air. When the rich and privileged of Pataliputra wanted to partake of less acceptable indulgences, they went down to the Lower City. It was hypocritical because without their patronage, none of those brothels, taverns, and questionable activities that passed for 'entertainment' would even exist. Yet by day, when in their stiff roles as 'higher' citizens, the upper castes and classes looked down on such establishments with disdain and disgust. Many of the same individuals who were revelling at this late hour in those dubious places of business would be condemning them maliciously on the morrow. It was the way the world worked: the rich abused and exploited. The poor took their money and endured. But it could not last forever. Justice would address the balance some day.

The three riders dismounted at the door of a nondescript house at the lowermost end of the Upper City, low enough that no self-respecting noble would reside there, yet expensive enough that no Lower City denizen could dream of affording it—even if caste, class, regional origins, and other social strictures so permitted. The house, like several others on this abutment facing one of the several bridges that connected Upper City to Lower City, was unoccupied at night, used mainly for storage by a guild of merchants. It appeared darkened and deserted at this hour. This in itself was not unusual: most Upper City mansions and estates were dark by this late hour. Even the sophisticated cosmopolitans conducted their private parties discreetly in inner chambers, out of view.

The three figures went up to the door of the house and knocked in a certain pattern as instructed. The door opened and they entered. The door shut behind them and a moment later, a peon appeared and led the horses to a stable beside the house. Barely a minute after they had arrived, there was no indication that anyone had even stopped at the deserted house on the empty street.

Shubhadangi lifted up the hood of her cloak. Tissyanka and Radhagupta did the same.

They were in a large chamber with stacks of various goods piled against

the walls. In the centre were a few seats and a table with some wine and refreshments. Three women stood around the table, waiting to greet the new arrivals.

‘Rani Shubhadraangi, Rani Tissyanka, Purohit Radhagupta, we thank you for accepting our invitation. Forgive the furtive nature of our contact and of this encounter. These are dangerous times and it would be best to keep this meeting as brief as possible. I need not remind any of you of the importance of keeping anything we say here completely confidential. I do not exaggerate when I say that our lives could depend on it.’

Shubhadraangi acknowledged the speaker, a woman a little past middle age with more than a little grey in her hair and wrinkles on her handsome face. She did not immediately recognize the lady but there was something vaguely familiar about her which she could not place. Perhaps it would come to her in time. ‘May we at least have the pleasure of knowing whom we are addressing?’

The speaker glanced at her companions, one of whom was a much younger woman, the third about midway between the other two in age. All three appeared well educated, cultured and sophisticated. They were clearly aristocrats, not Lower City women. But their faces were clear of the various unguents women of their class usually applied before stepping out in public, and they wore no visible jewellery or lavish accoutrements. All three were covered with dark robes similar to the ones Shubhadraangi and Tissyanka were wearing, but Shubhadraangi glimpsed fine but understated garments beneath the robes. They were women of means, certainly, but not anxious or vain enough to need to remind every passerby of the fact. Or perhaps they were just trying to stay lowkey.

‘You may call us Vichitra, Suchitra and Anumitra,’ said the first speaker. ‘I will not insult you by pretending those are our real names but they will have to suffice for now.’

Shubhadraangi nodded. ‘I suppose we have no choice ... Vichitra.’

Vichitra offered an apologetic smile. ‘Nor do we. Names can be ... dangerous at such a time. They can always be ... extracted.’

Shubhadraangi’s throat tightened. The woman was referring to extraction of information by torture. The very thought of ranked Queens of Mauryavansh being subjected to such barbaric treatment was nauseating but she took it in her stride. After watching the brutal mass execution of the Chandikas, she could believe anything. And after all, she knew the meaning of those awful screams and cries audible from the House of Torture. Still, surely Tissyanka and she were above such treatment. Weren’t they? ‘I see.’

Vichitra looked closely at Shubhadrangī. 'I do not mean to upset you, Rani Shubhadrangī. I'm only trying to be truthful.'

'With false names?' Tissyanka glanced around, her delicate features cast in a suspicious expression. 'Clandestine meetings? Covert communications? It would seem to be the opposite of truthfulness.'

The three strangers exchanged glances. 'You are right,' said the youngest one—Shubhadrangī already thought of her as Suchitra now. 'But these are necessary precautions as you will soon realize. These are dangerous—'

'Dangerous times,' Shubhadrangī said. 'You said that before. In that case, please get to the point.'

The third woman, the one who was not quite as young and pretty as Suchitra yet not as old and handsome as Vichitra—Shubhadrangī thought of her as Anumitra, chuckled softly. 'I told you ladies, she's no puppet to be manipulated with invisible strings. She has a head on her shoulders and a will to move mountains. Her son takes after her, after all, not after his father, and thank the Gods for that.'

Vichitra nodded slowly, her lined face showing creases as deep as knife cuts. 'Rani Shubhadrangī, we will not waste your time or ours. Your son and you are at grave risk. Your speaking out at sabha ...' She gestured to include Tissyanka. 'Both of you speaking out at sabha ... exposed your loyalties and painted targets on your backs. There are forces in Pataliputra that regard your outbursts as declarations of enmity. They want nothing less than your utter destruction now.'

Shubhadrangī felt her heart shrink but held herself erect and kept her voice steady. 'I think you exaggerate. Mauryavansh is still a republic. Every tribe has a right to speak at the sabha. Tissyanka and I merely voiced concerns. We never opposed or—'

Suchitra waved her arguments away impatiently. The youngest of the three, she was exceedingly pretty but there was a cold edge to her beauty that suggested hidden strengths. 'You are speaking as if this were still the age of Chandragupta. This is Bindusara's Mauryavansh. Or should I say, Khorasan's Mauryavansh. Everybody knows who really controls the reins of the empire. It's that vixen with the golden yoni and razor-sharp ambition. She has Bindusara as firmly in her grasp as if she were holding his balls in her fist.'

Shubhadrangī was frankly shocked by the young woman's crude language. 'No one doubts that our husband is fond of Noor Khorasan for the moment. He has had similar obsessions with other women in the past. It is a phase. It will soon pass. He is still the Emperor first, husband

second. However much he craves her company in his bed, he will never let that cloud his better judgement. I find it offensive to hear him spoken of in that way—or even her for that matter.’

The three women stared at her for a moment, then looked at each other. Vichitra sighed. ‘She is more asleep than we thought. Perhaps this was a mistake after all.’

Anumitra nodded slowly. ‘She is not ready. She could jeopardize everything.’

Suchitra shook her head, her pretty face hardening in an expression of distaste. ‘I was against this from the outset.’

Anumitra sighed. ‘I thought—’

Shubhadrangi leaned forward, striking the table with the palm of her hand. ‘Enough!’

Everyone reacted. Even Tissyanka started and looked at her.

‘Stop talking about me as if I’m not here. You set up this clandestine meeting days ago. Tissyanka, Radhagupta and I followed your strange instructions and came here in the dead of night. We have listened to you insult our husband and our sister queen. You owe us an explanation and the courtesy of treating our intelligence with respect. I want to know right now, what is your intention and why are we here?’

Tissyanka added her voice. ‘Tell us now or we walk out of here and report this to the imperial guard at once.’

Anumitra looked at Tissyanka and Shubhadrangi in turn, then focused on Tissyanka first. ‘You can do that, Tissyanka, and you and your children will be in the Torture Palace within the hour.’ She turned to Shubhadrangi. ‘You want an explanation and courtesy? Let us lay it out for you plain and clear. The Khorasanis have control of the Emperor and are pursuing an endgame. They mean to end the republic and turn it into a despotic regime, with the Emperor acting as a sovereign ruler and striking down anyone who dares whisper a word against him. Zero tolerance of dissidence. Khorasan will use the Imperial seat to settle old scores. The slaughter of the Chandikas was only a drop of blood in the river that is about to flood our empire. Mauryavansh will be torn apart by the violence that is about to break loose. If you thought the days of the Nanda Empire were horrifying, you should prepare to experience the worst violence that Jambudwipa has ever witnessed.’

Shubhadrangi stared at her, stunned. ‘Bindusara will never let that happen. He is a hard man, but he is no despot or tyrant. There is a limit to how much his passion for Noor Khorasan will let him—’

Suchitra exclaimed in exasperation. ‘Are you so asleep that you cannot

even feel the fire burning away your limbs? Bindusara is only a means to an end. If Khorasan has her way, he will be dead within the year, perhaps two. And there will be only one true ruler in Mauryavansh, and that will be Noor Khorasan.'

Tissyanka exclaimed. 'Impossible. The sabha will never accept a Khorasani as Emperor.'

Anumitra answered calmly. 'There will be no Sabha. The Pataliputra of today is already crumbling into ruin as we speak. But you are right. Politically speaking, it would be a tactical mistake for her to attempt to take the throne. She will control it, while remaining the puppetmaster as we said earlier. She will replace Bindusara with Sushim, most likely. Though she has other potential candidates in mind. That is one of the advantages of having a large litter to choose from. She will make whomever she wishes the top dog, so long as he or she wags his head whenever the tail demands.'

'And your son Ashoka is the only one who stands a chance of stopping her,' Vichitra added. 'That is why we have summoned you here with such elaborate secrecy. We wish to propose a counter plan to prepare an alternative to Khorasan's megalomaniacal scheme. We wish to make your son Ashoka the next emperor of Mauryavansh.'

Shubhadraangi felt the blood drain from her head. She swallowed. Her right hand reached instinctively for and found Tissyanka's left hand, and squeezed it. Tissyanka squeezed it back, communicating her own astonishment and support. Radhagupta, who had remained silent all this while as the five women spoke, shifted where he stood and cleared his throat to attract their attention.

'My queen Shubhadraangi,' he said. 'I suggest we hear them out. Acharya Kautilya had anticipated this very situation. Everything these ladies have said tonight has been predicted by him and it would be wise to prepare for this coming calamity. I advise you to continue the discussion.'

Shubhadraangi pursed her lips and leaned back, releasing a deep breath. 'I am listening.'

SEVENTEEN

Sushim was in an unusual mood today. After his usual usual bout of vomiting, abusing, thrashing the servants for serving him bad wine or bad food the night before—it was always the food or wine that he blamed, never his own excessive consumption—and defecating noisily enough to outdo an entire musical performance, Ashoka's elder brother emerged from his tent, blinking in the morning light.

‘Brother!’ he said, catching sight of Ashoka.

He came up to Ashoka and clapped a hand on his shoulder. ‘I have been meaning to have a word with you.’

Ashoka could think of several words he would like to have with Sushim. Wastrel. Brat. Misogynist. Glutton ... ‘Let’s speak after the hunt.’

But Sushim would not let go of his shoulder. Despite his excesses, Sushim was no weakling. A large frame, a big appetite, a reasonable amount of exercise and even some training when he felt like it, and most of all, an abundance of that magical elixir—youth—had gifted him a strong body which he abused and with which he abused other bodies frequently. ‘Now would be best.’

Ashoka glanced up at him, sensing a difference in Sushim’s manner. His usual bravado was barely sufficient to cloak his true meanness. Ashoka had seen every side of him, and there weren’t that many sides to see. There was drunk Sushim, angry Sushim, arrogant Sushim and selfish want-it-now Sushim, and all of these were variants on the same basic theme: I. Me. Mine.

‘Very well. Speak, Brother. What troubles you on this fine morning?’

Sushim looked at him with a leering expression that was probably his way of pretending to be friendly and relaxed. ‘Change is coming. A big change. Like a ...’ He stopped and groped, not used to trying to find words or phrases to express himself. Mostly, Sushim stuck to the names of things he wanted to eat, fuck or kill. Ashoka waited, not offering to help him out. ‘... storm,’ Sushim managed. ‘Change is like a big storm. Those not prepared are hurt. Badly. Best to be prepared.’

Ashoka resisted the urge to smile at his brother’s clumsy attempt at diplomacy. ‘Like hammering down the pegs of a tent?’

‘Yes! Exactly!’ Sushim frowned. ‘No, not a tent. More like a ...’ He

snapped his fingers. '... an attack. You have to prepare for an attack, otherwise ... you know what happens.'

'What happens?'

Sushim laughed at Ashoka's failure to guess the correct answer. 'You get hurt! That's what happens. Everyone knows that.'

Sushim stepped forward, trying to walk casually, keeping his arm still around Ashoka's shoulder. Ashoka remained where he was, causing Sushim some difficulty in completing the intended action with the degree of casualness desired. He stopped, turned back, and nudged Ashoka's back. 'Walk with me, Brother. This is important. Your future could depend on it.'

Ashoka walked with him, sidestepping around a tree trunk, forcing Sushim to pull his arm out of the way to avoid hitting it against the tree. They converged again on the other side of the tree, Ashoka walking just fast enough that Sushim had to step faster to keep up. They strolled through the camp, past a cookfire with several joints and haunches of meat being slowly basted, turned by flabby armed cooks who avoided looking at either of the two princes. Ashoka saw the cook closest to Sushim flinch as the First Prince raised his arm while passing by, but Sushim was only pushing back the fringe of hair off his own forehead. Sushim was not known for being kind to cooks—or any other servants.

'You have skills, Brother.' Sushim sounded almost critical, as if pointing out obvious faults that Ashoka couldn't help possessing. 'This would be good if you were just a warrior with ambitions. But as a prince ...' He shook his head.

'A prince shouldn't know how to fight and defend himself?'

Sushim grinned. 'Why bother? We have people to do all that for us. We rule! They serve.'

Ashoka knew better than to get into a debate about the importance of a future Emperor being able to rely on his own sword in moments of crisis. He pretended to listen without revealing anything of what he actually felt.

'When this storm comes ... soon ... it will come very soon ... like ... a monsoon typhoon! Those who are protected will survive. Everyone else ...'

'Will get hurt?' Ashoka offered.

Sushim glanced at him sharply, suspecting sarcasm. Ashoka kept his face free of any expression.

'This is a serious matter, Brother,' Sushim said, reaching out and breaking off wildflowers from a bush. He crushed them in his fist and dusted off his palms as if cleansing them of dirt. 'I am speaking to you

because as your elder brother, I feel responsible for you.'

Ashoka almost laughed out loud but restrained himself with an effort. Growing up, Sushim had been the palace bully, and one of the worst tormentors of his younger siblings. Ashoka was probably the only one he had not been able to bully successfully—at least not since Ashoka was able to stand and fight for himself. There were things Sushim had done to his own younger siblings that were anything but brotherly. The rape of several of his sisters, wet nurses and maids, the deaths of several servants, the brutal treatment of any number of small as well as large animals, including the horrifying abuse of an elephant that had caused Ashoka to threaten to kill Sushim on the spot and came close to getting Ashoka—Ashoka, not Sushim—exiled for assaulting the crown prince. It was safe to say that the only reason Sushim was still alive was because Ashoka's mother had made him promise that no matter what Sushim did, Ashoka would not harm him. 'We don't fight our own,' Subhadrangi had said, refusing to accept any argument to the contrary, and, gritting his teeth, Ashoka had obeyed.

Sushim folded his hands behind his back in conscious or unconscious imitation of their father's usual walking stance. 'I can keep you safe from the storm. But in exchange you must do something for me. Nothing comes without a price in this life. You would know that if you attended the treasury sessions.'

Ashoka had had no idea that Sushim attended the treasury sessions, or any sessions for that matter. Of course, Sushim probably only attended them to know more about the empire's finances, one of the few aspects of governance that actually appealed to him. He doubted that the minutiae of political administration interested his brother. He only cared about the gold.

'Are you making me a proposition?'

Sushim grinned. 'See? I knew there was something in that thick skull. I'm offering you a way to change your life.' He glanced around quickly, in that furtive way he had, cutting his eyes to the left then to the right. 'To save your life.'

Ashoka already knew where this was going. He was trying to think of a response that wasn't insulting, but it was hard.

He didn't have to think for long.

The Khorasani guard nearest to them yelled and suddenly sprouted an arrow from his throat.

EIGHTEEN

Violence exploded.

Arrows whickered past Ashoka and Sushim, flying every which way. Khorasani guards sprouted arrows and fell. Their captains and lieutenants sprang into action at once, yelling orders. Swords and spears appeared in fists, soldiers took cover behind trees, and those who had bows notched arrows and searched for targets.

Sushim stared at the Khorasani guard near them. The man had collapsed on the ground, and was drumming his feet in his death throes as blood splattered onto a bush, staining the white wildflowers red. Sushim gawked as if he had never seen a man struck by an arrow before. He was oblivious to the arrows flying around him. If he didn't take cover, he would be sprouting a few himself.

'Sushim!' Ashoka gestured to the ground. 'Down!'

Sushim stared at Ashoka, then looked back at the dying guard. He heard the shouts of other Khorasanis as they were hit by arrows and looked around. He took in the chaos of the camp in a daze. 'But the attack was to happen later, on the hunt,' he said slowly, in an irritable tone. 'And who's shooting at our own guards?'

He broke off as an arrow punched into a tree, passing through the space where his face had been only a second ago before he turned around. The arrow stuck in the trunk and shivered. He reached out to pull it from the trunk, with some effort. 'Who authorized the use of bowmen?' he said loudly, holding up the arrow. 'Only swords and knives were to be used—'

Ashoka slammed into Sushim's midriff, knocking his brother off his feet. They both fell on the ground, behind the tree from whose trunk Sushim had retrieved the arrow. 'Stay down!'

Sushim stared up at him with his familiar petulant look of outrage. 'Did you just push me?'

'Yes, because they're shooting at you!' Ashoka gripped the hand in which Sushim was holding the arrow. 'This was meant for you, Sushim!'

Sushim stared at the arrow, then at Ashoka. 'That's impossible. The Khorasani were only to kill the rest of the party.' He paused. 'And you, if you didn't agree to join us. There was no talk of bowmen using arrows.'

Ashoka had never felt like hitting his brother more than he wanted to

now. 'Sushim! The bowmen are not Khorasani! They're killing the Khorasani. They're aiming at us too.'

Sushim frowned as if about to object again, then heard a series of shouts and screams, followed by the clatter of swords and spears clashing. He grew very still and quiet, his eyes widening as he considered the implications. 'But ... who?'

Ashoka snatched the arrow from Sushim's hand. 'Look at the arrow. The notches on the end. Those are Lichchavi markings.'

'The Confederacy? How dare they attack us!'

'They did just try to assassinate our entire family.'

'But that was—' Sushim trailed off, trying to think again. 'I don't understand.'

'Just understand this. We're under attack. We have to get out of here. There are too many of them for us to fight.'

'The Khorasani—'

'—are dying! Look around you!'

Sushim raised his head cautiously, peering around the tree trunk. The Khorasani soldiers were fighting hand to hand with at least thrice their number. The attackers were all dressed in green, the end of their turbancloth wrapped around their mouths, then tied off behind their necks. There was no doubt about it. They were Lichchavis.

More Lichchavis poured in from all around, cutting down Khorasanis everywhere.

As Sushim and Ashoka watched, screams broke out from the tents and the imperial pavilion which they had left only a short while earlier. Sushim's young aristocratic friends and playmates were being slaughtered. Ashoka saw Sushim staring at the tent and mistook his look for concern.

'We can't do anything to help them. There are too many Lichchavi and too few of us.'

'She was good in bed,' Sushim said wistfully, watching a young merchant's daughter cut down by a Lichchavi with a sword. He shrugged. 'But there are always others.'

Ashoka wished he had let Sushim remain standing long enough to be cut down by Lichchavi arrows. 'We have to get out of here!' He rose and began moving towards a ditch behind a row of bushes. An arrow whickered at him and he twisted his body, avoiding it by an inch. He tracked it back to its source and saw the flash of green about fifty yards away. He also saw about a score of Lichchavi fighters coming at a run, swords drawn. The bowman stopped shooting to avoid hitting his own.

'Sushim. We have to go! Now!'

Sushim scrambled to his feet, dusting off his clothes. ‘You can’t order me around. I’m the Prince-in-Waiting.’

‘You’ll be Dead-in-Forest if you don’t move. Come on!’

Ashoka grabbed his brother’s elbow and rushed him in the only direction left to them: deeper into the jungle. ‘Run!’

The Lichchavi fighters were less than forty yards away now.

To Sushim’s credit, he was stupid but not suicidal. He saw the line of green uniforms and drawn swords coming at him and sprinted after Ashoka. He had always been a good runner. His taller height gave him a long stride which he used to keep pace with Ashoka.

Ashoka glimpsed fighting to his left. The Khorasani were putting up a strong resistance, taking down as many Lichchavi fighters as they could before going down themselves. A Khorasani lieutenant screamed as she swung in an arc, slashing several Lichchavis even as fighters dropped from a branch onto her back. The last he saw of her was as she fell to her knees, turning her sword upwards to stab the man on her back. The sword point went through his groin and punched out through his lower back. The Lichchavi screamed. There was fighting all across the clearing and under the trees surrounding it. Fire billowed from one of the tents as the Lichchavis used the campfire to set it ablaze. Even at a conservative estimate, he guessed the camp would be completely in Lichchavi hands within a few minutes. From what he could see, the Confederacy was slaughtering without taking any prisoners, and the Khorasani were forcing them to pay as dear a price as possible. The loudest screams came from the imperial pavilion where all the rich young friends of Sushim were contained. They would die the easiest, too hungover or addled to even think of putting up any resistance. Their lives until now had consisted of drinking, eating, fornicating, and indulging their every desire, served and protected by guards and soldiers at all times. They would die now like the spoiled brats they were, squealing and protesting. He could hear them cursing and yelling caste and class insults at their killers.

To the right were the Lichchavi fighters, a handful of them racing ahead to try to head off Ashoka and Sushim. That was good. Their presence obstructed their own bowmen from shooting at the two princes.

Ashoka glanced back over his right shoulder. More Lichchavi fighters were coming, shouting and running with sheathed swords. From their calls to one another he learned everything he needed to know: their orders were to try to capture Sushim and Ashoka alive if possible, or kill them if not, but under no circumstances allow them to get away.

‘Sushim, when I say so, do exactly what I tell you. We’ll have only

chance to get through this. No time for arguments. Do you follow?’

Sushim turned his head to glare at him. ‘I should—’

Ashoka cut him off. ‘You can’t talk to them! Lichchavi don’t care about ransoms or gold.’

Sushim glared at him as if to imply that everyone cared about gold but a clump of eucalyptus trees growing close together forced him to concentrate on not bashing out his brains.

Ashoka used the merciful lack of response to make his move. ‘Now, Sushim!’

Ashoka turned sharply left, ran several hundred yards as if he was circling back around the camp to head in the direction of Pataliputra—the very direction the Lichchavi would expect the two princes to go—then, when they were in a thicket of bramble bushes, turned sharply right and ran straight ahead, into the deep forest. Sushim stayed by his side, his breathing louder now but his footwork strong and quick. Had he been in better physical condition, with less wine and gluttony, he could’ve easily overtaken Ashoka. At least he managed to keep up.

The ruse worked. The Lichchavis, in their effort to cut them off had gone right first, and when Ashoka had gone left again, they had tried once again to anticipate and cut him off. Because there were so many of them and they were all spread across a wide area, they needed to yell out each change of direction to one another, swinging in a long unwieldy line first moving one way and then the other. This time, when he cut right and ran into the forest instead of in the direction of the horses and Pataliputra, they were caught completely unawares. He saw the gap between Sushim and he and the Lichchavis widen to two hundred yards, then three hundred. By the time they began to correct their trajectory and call out to the others fallen behind, Sushim and he were deep in a thicket of sal trees, too dense to see more than a couple of hundred yards. He knew they would track them and find their trail but for the moment, the advantage was theirs.

‘Run!’ he yelled, leading Sushim on a criss-cross pattern that zigzagged so many times in so many directions that he felt certain the Lichchavi would be forced to stop and argue about which way to go next. Besides, once they finally realized where he was going, they would have to pause and consider their options.

Sushim realized it long before they did. Ashoka saw him slowing, then come to a complete halt. He was winded and heaving but those were not the reasons he stopped.

‘You ... you’re ...’ He pointed. ‘Haunted?’

Ashoka nodded. ‘We’re going into the Haunted Forest.’

Sushim looked like he was going to vomit. The next instant, he did vomit. Ashoka took several steps away, staying upwind of the stench of regurgitated honey wine and roasted boar meat. Finally, Sushim wiped the back of his hand against his mouth, still struggling to catch his breath. 'Can't. Go. Haunted. Forest.'

'Yes, we can. It's our only chance. At least some of them won't dare enter. Those who do will be on edge. We'll have the advantage.'

Sushim hawked and spat, then peered down at his moist production. 'Ghosts of Kurukshetra.'

Ashoka smiled. 'Yes, Sushim, I know the stories. I heard them from the daiimaas when I was a boy, same as you did. But whom would you rather face right now? The so-called ghosts of soldiers who died in the Great War thousands of years ago? Or living and angry Lichchavi Confederacy soldiers trying to kill us with real weapons?'

Sushim didn't respond. He was still leaning against a tree, looking like a rich gambler who had just lost his entire fortune.

'Come on,' Ashoka said. 'We have to keep moving.'

He started at a loping stride, then realized that Sushim was not following and doubled back.

'Sushim.'

'This is not supposed to be happening. There was a plan.'

'Yes, but then the Lichchavi attacked the camp.'

'How could they? We killed all the Lichchavi assassins!' Sushim looked outraged, as if he had personally fought and killed the assassins.

Ashoka sighed. 'The assassination plot was probably the first step. They intended to follow it with a larger incursion. Those fighters who attacked the camp were wearing Confederacy green. They must have had a contingent of Lichchavi regulars waiting for word from Pataliputra, so they could attack the city.'

Sushim stared at Ashoka as if he were the stupid one. 'Attack Pataliputra? Are they insane? That's impossible.'

'So is trying to assassinate the entire imperial family. They had to have had a phase two for that plan. What good would it do them to assassinate us all without following through?' Ashoka glanced around, scanning the distant foliage for signs of movement, then the strips of morning sky visible through the slender gaps between trees. There was no indication of any pursuit yet but he knew the Lichchavi were less than half a mile behind. 'We need to keep moving.'

Sushim leaned against the tree trunk. 'Grand-mother Khorasan had said it would all go exactly as planned. Invite all the sons and daughters of the

nobles who had opposed or failed to support Khorasan in the sabha. Make sure you were present too. Keep everyone happily drunk and lull them into a stupor. Then, one morning, her soldiers would eliminate everyone and we would blame it all on the guests, saying they began attacking me, and proved they were complicit with the Lichchavi in the assassination plot. It would all be over in one morning, I could return to Pataliputra and she would use my testimony to justify moving against the Houses that had betrayed the Empire.'

You mean the Houses that you lied about betraying the Empire. Ashoka felt sick to his stomach even though he knew by now that he could hardly expect anything better from Sushim or Khorasan. What about Father? Was he aware of this too? How much did he know?

'We should move. They will come after us. They won't stop until they catch us or kill us now.'

'Okay, we go into the Haunted Forest. What then?'

'We go through. I know a way. It leads to Acharya's ashram. It's forty or fifty miles from here, no more.'

'Chanakya's ashram?' Sushim looked doubtful. 'Will we be safe there?'

'Safer than standing around here talking all day.'

Sushim looked around, as if suddenly realizing where they were and what they were running from. He glanced in the direction they had come from as if expecting to see green uniforms appearing anytime. 'There's no other way?'

'No. This is the only way to survive.' Ashoka started moving. 'Come on.'

He began jogging again, giving Sushim a chance to build up speed, before running at a steady pace. He was relieved to hear his brother's heavy breathing following him. He increased the pace. He intended to put as much distance between them and their pursuers before they began tracking their trail.

They ran through the day, heading deeper and deeper into ancient woods, into the jungle known as the Haunted Forest.

NINETEEN

He smelled death before he saw or heard it. It smelled like an unwashed cat, but beneath the rank, animal odour was another smell, a familiar, almost comforting one. A smell that reminded him of his infancy, of a dog that had lived with them since before he was born, and who had given birth to a litter once when he was old enough to understand the idea of birth. He knew that smell. Lactation. This was a female with milk in her mammarys, a mother. But not like his old faithful dog who had died of some mystery ailment when he was nine years old, breathing her last in his lap while he held her and stroked her lovingly till the end. He had cried for old Asu, using the cloth she used to sleep on as a pillow to keep her scent close. Over time the scent had faded away, but he had never forgotten it.

This scent was not Asu, he knew that. This was no dog that would come to lick his hand when called. It was the deadliest of predators in Girvan. The queen of the Vyag herself. A mature lioness who had birthed young cubs recently. That made her the most dangerous animal possible. She would be hungry, eager to replenish the nutrients she had expended during childbirth, to rebuild her own strength so she could care for her new born cubs. She would be lean, hungry, desperate. That was why she had not simply pounced on him and Sushim while they slept, but had crept up to where they lay, in a little gap between trees, resting out of sheer exhaustion after running all day. Sushim was fast asleep beside him, snoring loudly and musically, blissfully unaware of the deadly threat only a yard away. Ashoka was awake now and fully alert, but took care to keep his breathing in the same steady sleep pattern, his eyes closed and his muscles relaxed. One false move and it would all be over. Having spent his early years in the jungle, living amongst wild creatures with his mother in a simple thatched hut, he had a deep and abiding respect for all living beings. This was as much their world as his. They were neighbours, not enemies. But right now, at this moment, he was prey to this hunter. His neighbour had come calling and she was looking for dinner, not friendship.

He remained motionless, waiting to see what she did.

After a moment, Sushim's snoring grew muffled, as if he had turned over onto his stomach suddenly. Then a dragging sound, like a heavy object was being pulled across the dirt floor of the forest.

Ashoka opened one eye slowly, careful to keep it half-lidded; predators could see light reflected off the eyes of other animals.

He saw a mangy lioness dragging Sushim, still fast asleep, away. His head and one shoulder were in the lioness's mouth, gripped by her powerful jaws and teeth.

Ashoka weighed his options.

The lioness was clearly weak from birthing but those powerful jaws still possessed strength enough to bite through Sushim's neck and tear his head loose from his body. If she bit down, Sushim was as good as dead. The lioness was shrewd. Like all lions, she preferred to expend as little energy as possible, and right now it looked like her energy reserves were quite low. Dragging away a sleeping prey to kill and consume elsewhere was a typical Vyag technique. While pack animals would attack and kill a prey animal then eat it wherever it lay, Vyag liked easy prey, and always took them back to share with the rest of the pride and eat at leisure. The lioness needed only one of them to satisfy her hunger: by dragging Sushim away, she was trying to avoid a fight with Ashoka. He didn't flatter himself that she was doing this out of fear of him, she was merely making a judgement call and it was a smart one. Sushim was the heavier sleeper of them both, and was still fast asleep even now. Ashoka could still hear him snoring, his face buried inside the Vyag's massive jaws.

Ashoka realized he was being handed a golden opportunity.

He could shut his eye and let the Vyag take Sushim away and kill him.

That would make him First Prince. The next in the line of succession. Future Emperor of Mauryavansh.

But if that was all he cared about, he would have let Sushim die back there, pierced by Lichchavi arrows.

He had no desire to be First Prince or Emperor. The snake's nest of politics disgusted him. He had no desire to take his father's place, or, in fact, to become his father.

He didn't think Sushim would make a better Emperor than Bindusara, but it was Sushim's legacy. His birthright. Sushim was a terrible person, never mind that he was his brother. But Ashoka couldn't just let him be dragged away to be eaten by a lion. He couldn't let a fellow human being be killed without doing something to stop it. It was not sympathy or caring. It was not brotherly love or kinship. It was simply empathy. The way he was born and the way he had been brought up: to care and respect all life equally, regardless of what that life may represent. If he killed any enemy, it was only in self-defence. He couldn't let Sushim just die like this.

But he didn't want to kill the Vyag either. He loved animals. She was only trying to survive in her natural habitat. They were the intruders here, Sushim and he. She was only doing what she had to do to live.

It was a dilemma—to kill an animal which he respected, loved, admired, in order to save a despicable excuse for a living being? Or to let his own brother die and gain a measure of privilege that he had earned through his own negligence and inaction.

Ashoka had been taught the precepts of karma and dharma, like every other young child. He knew dharma demanded that he protect his brother and kill the lion. But karma was in conflict with dharma. He did not want to kill the lion.

He rose slowly to his feet, moving in slow unthreatening steps toward the darkness between the trees. He could track the lion now only by the dragging sounds but as he approached, he could glimpse the two large eyes shining in the darkness. The sound of dragging ceased and he heard a low rumbling within that great chest.

The lion had released Sushim and was staring at him, ready to defend its prey.

Ashoka crouched down, then sat on the forest floor, crossing his legs, and keeping his arms on his thighs. He kept his eyes averted downwards, knowing that to look an animal, any animal, directly in its eyes was to challenge it. He kept his voice low, unthreatening, but firm and without any fear. Not because he felt no fear, but because fear was irrelevant here and would only rouse the Vyag into attacking.

'I know you are hungry,' he said softly, his voice sounding alien amidst the sounds of the jungle at night. 'I know you must eat and he is easy prey. But he is my brother. I cannot let you take him. If you try to take him, I will have no choice but to stop you. Release him now. Leave him where he lies. Walk away. Go home to your cubs. Find other prey. Live your life. Raise your litter. Rule your pride. I have no quarrel with you. We are both children of this forest, we can live together without conflict. I do not wish you harm. Go in peace, my sister. Go now.' More firmly, in a stronger tone: 'Go!'

The Vyag stared silently. The large eyes gleamed in the darkness. There was some faint luminescence from the sky that filtered down through the trees. He could just make out the great face, the whiskers, the great head and massive jaw, the long fangs and bone-crushing teeth. She was assessing him, gauging his intentions. She sensed that he intended her no harm, otherwise she would be growling and snarling. The fact that she was staying quiet showed that she smelled his absence of malice. He began to

think that maybe he would get away with this after all, that this standoff could be resolved without violence.

‘Ashoka?’ Sushim’s voice was quavering, scared. He was awake and aware that he lay on the ground, a lion’s jaws hovering over his face.

The Vyag roared at the sound of Sushim’s voice and the scent of his fear. She bent her head to grasp Sushim’s head in her jaws again, clinching him in a death grip.

The time for indecision had passed.

Ashoka’s body moved without requiring permission from his mind. A child of the jungle, trained from birth to be at one with the earth, he knew instinctively that the wrong move would cause the lion to crush his brother’s head in an instant. There was only a fraction of a kshana to do exactly what was required and no second chances.

He threw the stone he had clasped in his fist while watching the Vyag draw Sushim away.

The instant the stone left his hand, he was moving, leaping, hitting the ground and running—away from the lion and his brother.

He sprinted in an arc that led around the place where the Vyag had Sushim pinned.

The stone he had flung struck the Vyag on its large snout, one of the most sensitive and vulnerable parts of its anatomy. The Vyag let out a squeal of pain that Ashoka heard as he sprinted around, concentrating all his attention on dodging tree trunks and overhanging branches. He could no longer see her but he was counting on the fact that her immediate reaction would be to loosen her grip on Sushim and roar to express her outrage. A moment later, he heard her roar in pain and fury. He was already parallel to the spot where the Vyag and Sushim lay and he turned inwards now, arcing back towards her, coming up on her from behind. If there were other Vyag in the darkness behind her, he would stand no chance. Female Vyag usually hunted in tandem but he sensed that this one was on her own. Her mangy condition, sallow ribs, heavy breathing, all indicated she had not fed since birthing. Had she been with one or more sister Vyag, that would not have been the case as the other female or females would have kept her fed till she could hunt for herself again. He was gambling his life on his observations. And Sushim’s.

The Vyag heard him approaching. She may have been distracted and outraged by the stone to her snout, but she was still a Vyag, the queen of the jungle. She was swinging around even as he came running up from behind her. Her massive face turned to face him as he came at her, and her jaws were open wide, snarling, as she crouched and launched herself in a

leap that would end only with him decapitated or disembowelled. His tactic had worked. He had succeeded in making her lose her hold on his brother and turn away from him. Sushim may or may not have the presence of mind and survival instinct to get up and run away, but at least he was no longer in immediate danger of having his skull crushed or neck severed by those razor-sharp fangs.

Ashoka leaped at the Vyag while running straight at her, twisting his body sideways as he jumped. She launched herself at him at the same time. Were they two Vyag colliding, he would have met her in mid-air, great jaws locking, paws with extruded claws ripping, and both would have rolled over in a flurry of dust, leaves, blood and saliva. But he was merely human, not Vyag, and he had no great jaws, razor-sharp fangs or claws capable of ripping open tough Vyag hides.

All he had was a dagger and his instincts and an indomitable desire to survive.

Mortal and Vyag flew at each other in the darkness of the jungle night.

The mortal's body spun, twisting around so he was flying upside down through the air, under the Vyag's body.

The Vyag flew overhead, her great jaws seeking his puny head and missing. Her deadly claws were out and sought his soft belly and vital organs.

Ashoka felt her claws skitter and scratch his chest and belly, scraping his ribs and sending stripes of fire ablaze, but he was thin and had angled his body so he passed between her claws, passing under her exposed belly. His dagger moved upwards, striking, piercing, ripping ... and the force of his momentum and her own weight and motion did the rest.

Ashoka landed on top of Sushim, and his brother's head struck his back. He rolled over, once, twice, thrice, before regaining his footing in a crouch, facing back the way he had come, dagger held out ready to strike again, eyes seeking out his antagonist.

The Vyag fell, tumbled, and rolled over twice before striking the trunk of a tree with her torso. Ashoka heard the thump and her squeal of pain and the soft wet sloshing sounds that told him she was done.

His keen sense of smell caught the unmistakeable odour of offal, blood, and assorted fluids and organs. He heard the sounds of distress from the Vyag, punctuated by her attempts to roar and growl to warn her enemy that she was not finished yet, she could still destroy him if he dared to come close.

Ashoka rose and walked forward, still crouched low, dagger dripping over his hand, wrist, forearm. The blood of the Vyag was thick and syrupy

and hot, very hot.

Sushim was whimpering in a heap on the ground where the Vyag had abandoned him. He cringed as Ashoka came close. 'Maa!' Ashoka walked past him and continued to where the Vyag lay against the tree trunk, her growls subsiding already as the life poured out of her through the great gaping hole in her belly. He heard her snuffling and her pain and his heart broke at the thought that he had caused such agony. Why did two children of the forest have to clash? Why did he have to kill her? He knew he would never know the answers to those and the other questions that came in the aftermath of taking another life.

He slowed, calming his breathing, trying to make himself as non-threatening as possible. He lowered the hand with the dagger and kept his voice low and unaggressive.

'Mother. I am not your enemy but I had to do what I did to save my brother. I mean you no harm or malice. Forgive me for what I did. It was only to survive.'

Those large eyes glistening in the darkness, the sounds of distress weaker and more plaintive now. She growled softly at her murderer, but had no strength to raise herself up to defend herself further from attack. She had been dealt a death blow and she knew it. In her already weakened condition, it was taking everything she had just to stay conscious.

Ashoka crouched down low before her, putting down the dagger.

He joined his palms in a namaskara to her.

'Forgive me, Mother. I had no choice.'

She mewled then. A strangely disturbing sound that reverberated through his conscience, and pierced his soul. He felt tears well up in his eyes, and struggled to hold them back. What a world this was, where two beings who had no hatred for one another had to fight to the death to ensure survival.

'I promise you this, on my own mother's oath, that I will care for your cubs as if they are my own blood. They will be loved and cared for and raised up to be strong and healthy and live full lives. I swear this as my name is Ashoka, son of Shubhadra and Bindusara.'

The Vyag raised her head then and roared once, a long mournful cry that echoed through the jungle.

Then she lay back and stared at him, her breathing coming in slow painful intervals.

She continued to stare at him, breathing painfully.

He understood what she was asking of him.

Ashoka wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

He picked up the dagger.

He crawled forward, over the hot wet spillage of her life's blood and intestines.

He came close enough that she could have bitten his face off, or clawed his throat out, if she had desired. Even in her weakened state, it would take no more than a single snap.

But she lay still, watching him, waiting, beseeching.

He raised the dagger to her throat, felt the hot wet fur brush the back of his hand, smelled her most intimate death odours, the heat of her breath on his face like a blessing. He gripped the back of her head, the mane, with one hand, and used the dagger in the other hand, in a single decisive motion.

When he released that great head, the breathing had ceased, the great eyes were shut, the life had passed out of her proud body.

He crouched before her, kneeling to the queen of the jungle, and he wept his heart out for what he had done, what he had had to do.

TWENTY

‘Yuvraj Ashoka! Yuvraj Sushim!’

Ashoka watched from a branch twenty feet high as the soldier called out for the umpteenth time. There were other armed men and women in the woods, all searching for him and his brother. Except for Dwadesh, who was still in his imperial colours, they were all dressed in a ragtag manner, displaying no affinity to either Mauryavansh, Khorasan, Lichchavi Confederacy, or any other nation or tribe. From what he could tell, they were of widely different tribes, regions, nations. Some appeared to be of mixed blood, local and foreign. Most were young, too young, yet seemed confident with a sword, or bow or whatever weapon he or she happened to be carrying. The weapons showed use, and the bearers’s experience belying their tender age. They had been in a battle recently, judging from their appearance, and from the cuts and bruises and injuries hastily bandaged. He had been watching and listening to them calling out for the past several minutes, trying to decide if they were seeking him out to kill him or for some other reason.

Sushim was sitting on the same branch, hugging the trunk of the tree as if it were his late mother and he would never let go. He had said very little since the encounter with the Vyag. Ashoka guessed he was still in shock at waking up in the middle of the night to find his head in the jaws of a lion. He had seen Ashoka slay the lion but had not expressed a word of gratitude. Ashoka had expected none but it was galling to have the entire incident ignored as if it had never occurred. It still hurt him to recall the death of the Vyag. He hated having had to kill that beautiful beast. The least Sushim could do was show some emotion, acknowledge the fact of her death. But then again, this was Sushim, who hadn’t cried at the death of his own mother. Why would he care about the death of a Vyag who had tried to kill him. Brothers they were, but as unlike as the Vyag and mortal. More unlike, actually, since Ashoka found it easier to identify with the Vyag than with a privileged, entitled, spoiled brat of a young man like Sushim.

‘Yuvraj! We are friends. We mean you no harm!’

Ashoka felt the ball of fur cradled in his anga vastra stirring.

The sound of the voices had woken up his little ward. Furball was an apt

name for the time being, since the tiny Vyag cub was little more than a bundle of fur, teeth and claws. The last were still nascent but sharp enough to scratch. He felt the infant claws scraping at his chest as it tried to find purchase. He pressed his hand to the bundle wrapped in his upper garment, securely cradled by careful knotting, reassuring it that all was well. It mewled softly, too softly to be heard by anyone but Ashoka, and went back to sleep.

He felt for the poor cub. Its world had been turned upside down overnight. After mercifully ending the Vyag mother's pain, he had sought out her lair. By the time he reached, the scene was one of carnage. A pack of hyenas had attacked the cubs in the absence of their mother and killed all but one of the litter. Chasing them away had been an easy enough task—Ashoka only had to throw a stone or three and yell loudly and indignantly, and they had scattered, barking insolently as they retreated into the jungle, yellow eyes gleaming as they looked back. The lair was a mess of uneaten body parts and gore. What was left of the poor litter was barely enough to make out how many had been there before the hyenas attacked—either four or five cubs, he estimated. Huddled under the cover of a rock, crying and struggling for life, was the last survivor. A female cub, the runt of the litter from the looks of it. She had lost an entire leg to the hyenas, and the half-bitten fragment of bone jutting out from the wound had made him choke with sympathy. That shard of bone was causing her agony every time she attempted to step on it. He considered putting her out of her pain but when she tried to bite him, he thought perhaps she still had spirit enough left to fight on through the struggle that was life. He used his dagger to chop off the fragment of bone, leaving her with a cleanly severed leg, and three perfectly good ones. She howled and scratched and bit him but he repaid her with much stroking, a gentle voice and the comfort of his own warmth. Perhaps it was the fact that he carried the scent of her mother, or the fact that he was a warm body offering comfort and kindness. After a while she stopped struggling and fell unconscious, her tiny brain taxed beyond its limit by her experience. He held her close and kissed her gently on the top of her head. She smelled terrible. But then again, he was sure he must smell just as awful to her.

Sushim and he had spent the rest of the night in this tree, after he had forced Sushim to climb up. Ashoka needed some rest and he had no desire to be forced to fight a pack of hyenas who might well be bold enough to return to finish off their midnight snack.

Now, there were human hyenas calling out to them. And he had to decide if they could be trusted any more than the four-legged ones.

He came to a decision.

‘Dwadesh.’

He spoke the single word just loud enough to be heard by the young man about thirty feet away. It was a test.

Dwadesh swung around at once, looking in the correct direction, behind and up. He spotted Ashoka standing on the branch of the tree and grinned.

‘Ashoka! We have been searching for you since first light.’

‘Who are your friends?’

Dwadesh looked at the other young men and women moving through the dense forest, still calling out Ashoka’s and Sushim’s names. None of them had heard Ashoka or realized that Dwadesh had spotted him yet.

‘They are like me.’

Ashoka frowned. ‘They look too young to be imperial soldiers.’

Dwadesh shook his head. ‘Not soldiers. Not imperial. Just fighters.’

‘Whom do you fight?’

Dwadesh shrugged and something came over his young face, an emotion Ashoka recognized well. ‘It used to be anyone who is an enemy of the Empire. But that changed when our mothers were killed. Now we are fighters without a nation. Rebels without a cause.’

‘Your mothers?’

‘We are the bastard children of the Chandikas.’

Dwadesh did not explain further, merely said the words and waited for Ashoka to respond.

Ashoka nodded. The Chandikas were officially not permitted to have husbands and families. But many of them took lovers of different sexes, sometimes from within their own ranks, sometimes from outside. It was not officially permitted, but Mauryavansh employed a Don’t See, Don’t Know policy. There were also Chandikas who were, occasionally but not that rarely, sexually assaulted in the line of duty. When this happened, the Order took action, operating discreetly and anonymously. The offending man, or men as was often the case, since a single Chandika was usually equivalent to at least two fighting men, would quietly just vanish one day, never to be seen again. Since his or their bodies were never recovered, it could not be termed murder, and without any proof of their death, it could not be termed retaliation. But everyone knew what it was and it usually discouraged other men from even looking at a Chandika with the wrong intention. Usually, but not always. Men could be stupid when it came to their gonads.

The bastard offspring of such illicit, forced or consensual relations could never be acknowledged by their mothers. They were usually taken in by

the families of the Chandikas and raised as cousins or siblings. Some of them never came to know their true mothers, but a few did know and Ashoka had met some. He had been aware that Dwadesh himself was the bastard son of a Chandika but not which one. So it did not surprise him to know that the rest of the bastards banded together, especially in the wake of recent events.

‘I see you’re not wearing your imperial uniform anymore,’ he said, still keeping his voice low.

Dwadesh had come closer to the tree which Ashoka and Sushim were occupying, his eyes watching Ashoka to ensure this was permissible. Ashoka nodded to let him know it was all right to approach.

‘I was let go from the imperial army,’ Dwadesh replied. He looked up at Ashoka. ‘Some question about my parentage. It was never put into so many words but it was never a secret either.’ He gestured at the forest. ‘None of us can ever find a place with the Empire, not officially.’

Ashoka nodded. That was Pataliputra in action. Bias of every kind, institutionalized, was the cornerstone of the Empire. It was inevitable that once the Chandikas were decommissioned, anyone linked to them would also suffer a fall from grace.

‘I don’t trust these people! They could be sent to kill us. Don’t believe anything he says!’ Sushim’s voice rang out plaintively, loud enough to startle away a hummingbird hovering nearby.

Ashoka ignored his brother. Dwadesh did the same.

‘Why come looking for us?’

‘The danger is over. We fought the Lichchavis and won.’

‘You fought them? You mean ...?’

Dwadesh’s associates had heard Sushim’s plaintive voice and were closing in from all sides, approaching cautiously. Dwadesh made a series of gestures to communicate to them all was well, and they relaxed and gathered at the base of the tree.

‘Our ragged bunch of outcasts, yes. Is that such a surprise? That we did what the Khorasani guard could not?’

‘That is not what I meant, Dwadesh. The Khorasani were arrogant and unprepared, and they were taken by surprise. They were busy slaughtering themselves, it was a perfect time for the Lichchavi to attack when they did. Besides, you are sons and daughters of Chandikas, the fiercest finest warriors that ever walked the soil of Jambudwipa. I would wager you could face anything and win.’

The looks on the upturned faces showed their pleasure at his words. Ashoka smiled at them. ‘Thank you for your service to the Empire.’

‘We did not do this to serve the Empire,’ said a young girl with close-set eyes and a scar across her throat that suggested someone had tried to kill her and failed.

‘We are not servants of the Empire. Any empire.’ This came from a boy younger than Ashoka with short hair curled into ringlets on his dark scalp.

Dwadesh said quietly: ‘We are free agents. We fought the Lichchavi because they were partly responsible for what happened to our mothers. And for you.’

‘Me?’

Dwadesh nodded. ‘You were a friend to our mothers. You stood up for them. Your mother stood up for them. Nobody else cared even to speak up once. You cared. We owe you a debt for trying, for caring.’

Sushim spoke up impatiently. ‘If these ruffians are telling the truth, and the Lichchavi are gone, send word back to Pataliputra, asking for an escort to accompany me back to the city. Go on, then. I will see that you are well rewarded.’

Dwadesh looked at Sushim as if he were an insect on the tree. ‘We do not want your gold, Yuvraj Sushim.’

‘Then what do you want?’ Ashoka asked the question. He was still unable to fathom the true intention of this group. He had not forgotten his guru’s warnings to be cautious.

Dwadesh looked around at his group. ‘If word gets back to Pataliputra, they will send reinforcements. But they will be Khorasani reinforcements. And you know what that means.’

Ashoka knew. ‘Their orders will be to retrieve only Sushim alive.’

Sushim looked up at Ashoka then down at Dwadesh. ‘I will tell them you are to be spared.’

Ashoka looked at Sushim, then at Dwadesh. His eyes met Dwadesh’s eyes and they exchanged a look. In that moment, he knew he could trust the bastard, and that he could never trust his brother.

‘How many are you bastards?’ Ashoka asked. He used the word not as a pejorative, merely for want of a better collective term.

‘A hundred and fifty maybe. Some of us were hurt in the clashes with the Lichchavi.’

‘This is unacceptable! We have to get word to Pataliputra! I have to get back. If you won’t send word then ... you do it. Escort me back this very minute!’ Sushim’s voice rose in pitch with each sentence. He released one hand from the tree trunk to gesture for emphasis and almost lost his grip and fell. He grasped the trunk again, hugging the tree. ‘I command you as your First Prince!’

‘I am not a servant of the Empire anymore, Yuvraj,’ Dwadesh said casually. ‘You are not my prince.’

Sushim looked startled. ‘But you have to help us! You cannot leave us here! There may be more Lichchavi assassins. They could ambush me. Ashoka and I alone cannot fight them if they attack in force.’

Dwadesh shrugged indifferently. ‘You can stay here in the forest or find your own way back to Pataliputra. As you wish.’

‘But ... but ...’ Sushim spluttered but seemed unable to find words to sufficiently express his outrage.

‘There is another way,’ Ashoka said. He raised his voice, speaking loud enough for all the bastards to hear. They raised their young faces to him, male and female both, dark and darker skinned, eyes revealing souls older than their years. He found himself able to relate to these outcasts of Empire. They were not unlike himself. He had a place in the Empire, but did not want it. They neither wanted a place nor had one.

‘Come back with us. I will see to it that you are not harmed.’

His words lingered in the silence. They exchanged glances with each other, expressing varying emotions but mainly one question. Dwadesh spoke it aloud.

‘Why should we? This is not our fight. We are unwanted by Pataliputra. Why should we fight to protect two princes of Mauryavansh?’

‘Why did you come seeking me out? You could be a hundred miles away from here by now.’

‘And then what?’

Ashoka glanced at Sushim, who was looking at him with a combination of fear and confusion. Sushim understood that his authority meant nothing to these people but didn’t like it. He was scared and angry but not foolish enough to think he could bully his way out of this situation. ‘If you accompany us to Pataliputra, First Prince Sushim and I will vouch for your role in saving us from the Lichchavi. He will personally guarantee that you are reinstated in the imperial army, every last one of you.’

Ashoka locked eyes with Sushim. ‘What say, Brother? Surely that is a small reward to repay these gracious fighters for aiding us in our moment of need?’

Sushim swallowed, both his saliva and his pride, and said in a desperate, over-eager tone: ‘Yes, yes, of course! Escort us and I will endorse you myself! I will speak on your behalf to my father, the Emperor.’

‘Our father,’ Ashoka correctedly mildly. ‘Yes, we shall both petition him together, Sushim. Because the lives of the First and Second Princes of Mauryavansh are worth that and much more.’

‘Yes! Yes!’ Sushim all but shouted.

Dwadesh exchanged a glance with his associates. They looked at each other and then up at Ashoka again.

‘We have no desire to rejoin the imperial army,’ Dwadesh said. ‘But we will do this for you on one condition.’

‘Anything!’ Sushim cried. ‘Name your price!’

‘Our price is our dignity. We have no desire to serve the imperial army anymore. But it is true, we could use some coin, and some patronage. We ask only that we be instated not as regular army, but as a special order of the militia. Serving under you, Yuvraj Ashoka, as your personal guard. That is our condition, and you may either accept it or leave it, that is your imperial choice.’

Ashoka looked at Dwadesh and smiled. ‘I accept.’

‘Yes! Yes!’ Sushim cried in relief. ‘Now let me down from this wretched tree!’

TWENTY-ONE

Noor Khorasan watched with blazing eyes from the queens's balcony as the sabha session came to a conclusion. She watched Queen Shubhadraangi tearfully embrace her son Ashoka and wished she had a bow and arrow so she could drill both mother and son with a single shaft. Shubhadraangi's tears were tears of pride and relief. Bindusara had just acknowledged and thanked his son personally before the entire sabha for his role in keeping his brother First Prince Sushim safe from the Lichchavi assassins in the jungle. There was also something about a lion attack mentioned, and how Ashoka had again intervened to save his brother. With these latest accomplishments, in addition to the earlier events in the city, and his role in exposing the Lichchavi Confederacy assassination plot as well as the complicity of the Chandikas, it now seemed that Ashoka had singlehandedly managed to save the imperial family from grave threats, both external and internal, risking his own life and limb against assassins, traitors, and even wild beasts, to save his brother and heir apparent, and ensure the safety of his family. In recognition of their dual role in ending the Lichchavi threat, the Emperor had proposed sending both brothers to Taxila, where a violent uprising was threatening the stability of the region. As First Prince, Sushim would be the Satrap of Taxila, a great honour to be bestowed on one so young. But it was implicit that though he did not have the title, Ashoka nevertheless shared this honour with his brother, and would accompany him to his posting. Bindusara had made a speech extolling the virtues of brotherly service, quoting from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and ended by implying that what Ashoka had done was what any brother ought to do if he followed dharma.

Noor Khorasan knew that Bindusara did not enjoy praising Ashoka or acknowledging his part in the recent events any more than she did, but as Emperor he understood the importance of appearances and political currency. Ashoka was a hero whether he was acknowledged as one or not. By acknowledging and rewarding him, Bindusara made himself seem bigger. More imperial, was the phrase he had used when they had discussed it yesterday. Noor had known when a cause was lost and had fumed and seethed but outwardly pretended to encourage his decision. She had even told him to give his blessings to Ashoka's unorthodox request to

recognize the bunch of bastard ruffians he had brought home from the forest and grant them imperial status. Bindusara had been against the request, especially since Sushim, once safely home, had told his father that for all they knew those ruffians could well be in cahoots with the assassins themselves. But Noor Khorasan had seen an opportunity and had taken it.

‘Send them with Ashoka to Taxila, as their main guard.’

Bindusara had frowned. ‘That would be highly unusual. They are barely children. Bastards and untrained. It would reflect badly on Sushim. Imagine a First Prince coming to take charge of his satrapy accompanied by a band of ruffians!’

‘Then send a token imperial guard with them. But send them as well. Ashoka could have asked for much more. He could have asked for a satrapy himself like Sushim did. This is the only thing he wants. Give it to him.’

Bindusara had looked at her. They were in her bedchamber, after sex, and his body still had a sheen of sweat on it. She was naked and languorous, reclining against silk cushions, enjoying the gentle breeze from the hand fans waved by the serving girls. In a moment, she would ask Orzala to wash her with cool, scented water—and bring her to the peaks of pleasure that Bindusara was incapable of ever accomplishing.

‘Very well,’ he said, watching her shrewdly. She knew from his expression that he understood that she was asking him to do this for a reason. He did not ask the reason, which was wise of him. He knew her well enough to know not to do so. She smiled, lifting one bare leg and capturing his limp member between her toes. She began to work it back and forth slowly. ‘An Emperor must be generous.’

He sighed, settling back against the cushions and enjoying the attention of her soft feet. ‘An Emperor must conserve his resources.’

She watched him swell again to full hardness, working her toes and feet expertly. ‘Sometimes, it is necessary to expend some resources in order to gain new ones.’

He groaned, totally in her control.

Now, she swept out of the queens’s balcony of the sabha hall, ignoring the many sister queens who tried to catch her eye or smile to gain favour. She stormed out and along the corridors back to her apartments. Even though she had been the one to push Bindusara into acknowledging Ashoka’s achievements, it still infuriated her to see that mongrel standing in the sabha hall, beside the First Prince, as if he belonged there. And his mother? Oh, Noor wished she could use Shubhadra for target practice. That whole motherly act, lover of nature and little animals, made her sick.

Obviously it was all an act. There was no room for motherly love, kindness and gentleness in this world. It was a wolf-eat-wolf world. Anyone who knew anything knew that. Women who pretended to nurture their young and talked of things like honour and dharma, equality and love were deranged, dangerous people. The kind of people who had no place in the world. They were the weak and the meek and they had to be destroyed, the way a pack of predators destroyed any creature that limped or had a weakness. Only the strong deserved to survive. She longed for the day when she would be able to see Shubhadra reduced to a mass of bleeding agony as she deserved.

She turned a corner and came face to face with the very object of her hatred.

Shubhadra and Ashoka paused, staring at Noor Khorasan.

Noor caught herself and composed her face to reflect a suitably neutral expression.

‘Why, Queen Shubhadra,’ she said aloud, assuming a smile. ‘You must be so proud! My sincerest congratulations to you and your brave son, Ashoka. May you both enjoy your glory as long as it lasts!’

‘Thank you, Queen Khorasan,’ Shubhadra replied, bowing her head in acknowledgement. ‘You are very gracious.’

Ashoka inclined his head slightly but did not bow or speak. His eyes bored into Noor’s eyes as if he could see straight through to her soul and could read her innermost thoughts and feelings as clearly as if they were written out in Sanskrit on a child’s board at an ashram gurukul.

She smiled again in parting and went on her way.

I will get you when you least expect it, she thought as she swept down the corridors. I will show you what the world is really like, and on that day, you will bow and beg and kiss my feet and cry for my mercy.

And I shall not give it.

EPILOGUE

‘Bharata.’

The forest of gleaming cat eyes shone like a swarm of fireflies. It was the night before the first full moon of spring and the air was still cool, the leaves damp with dew, the forest deathly silent as every insect, leaf-eater, bird and animal showed respect to the Gathering of the Vyag. In the star-rich sky overhead, the children of Garuda drifted, watching with sharp interest, for when all the world is forest, every living creature is kin. If the Vyag had a problem, it was every creature’s problem.

‘Bharata,’ said Whitest Whisker. An ancient lion who had been dam for so many litters, she was no less than Mother Goddess to the Vyag. She had seen a hundred mates come and go, a thousand cubs grow to maturity and wither, been matriarch to a hundred prides, survived sicknesses and stampedes, storms and avalanches, and had personally killed at least one mortal for every hundred Vyag present at the Gathering.

There were six hundred thousand Vyag present.

For those Vyag who were poor at counting—which was most of them—it meant a kill score of some six thousand mortals.

‘Bharata.’

When she spoke the word in the voice of the Vyag, it sounded not like a mortal spoken word. Mortal language, even at its most eloquent, was a clumsy attempt at communication. The Vyag conveyed more through a single growl and look, through scent and effusion, through context and day and time, than a mortal could convey through an entire scroll. That single name, growled thrice, sent ripples of awe and unease through the vast Gathering. Even the monkeys perched on the high branches, noses twitching with the overwhelming stench of so many Vyag, shivered nervously at the scent released in response to that name. Who was this mortal who caused the Great Gathering of Vyag to twitch their whiskers?

‘Bharata,’ said the whitest whisker for the fourth time.

Combined with the ancient matriarch’s scent, emissions, postures, tail twitches, whisker quivers, eyes, baring of teeth, and the context and setting, the fourfold repetition conveyed the entire history of the Vyag’s ancient feud and truce with mortal kind.

Mostly, what it conveyed was that the truce had been broken. By a

mortal of the same race as the one who had initiated the truce itself, a thousand generations earlier.

A Bharata.

The response of the Gathering was instantaneous and momentous.

With the voice of a single great pride, the Vyag raised their heads to the full moon and roared out their fury. The sound of their rage filled Girvan for a hundred yojanas in every direction, sending terror into the heart of every living creature. Every creature, except mortals. They were the only ones who had no clue what was about to befall them. Even though it was upon them that this cataclysm would be unleashed.

Kautilya woke with a shudder, breath rattling in his sawdust-filled throat like the final gasp of a dying empire. For a long desperate moment, he struggled with the ghosts of the past, the fears of the future and the terrors of the present. At one point, he thought that this was the night. His wretched lungs would lose at last this ancient battle and he would die here, on his pallet, in his ashram in the deep jungle. Months, perhaps years later, his corpse would be found by some bandit or forager, withered to a dried husk, bones cracked by lion jaws, head smashed open and emptied of its edible contents—a stringy, unappetising mouthful or two to some passing Vyag.

Not just any Vyag.

A lion.

The symbol of Mauryavansh.

At this thought, his throat finally won the battle over his beleaguered brain. With a great effort, he succeeded in drawing breath into his tortured body. He focused on the intake and output of air until he felt well enough to trust his body to manage on its own. How could drawing breath pose such a challenge? He knew from his study of Ayurveda and anatomy that it was related to the brain which ultimately controlled all bodily functions and processes. That part of his brain that had mastery over the simple act of breathing had suffered some lapse. He wished that instead of the breathing part of his brain, some other part could have lapsed.

The part which controlled memories.

Or better yet, the part which controlled dreams.

Except he knew that what he had just viewed in his tortured breath-deprived sleep had not been a dream. It had been a vision. A bizarre nightmare about Vyags of all kinds gathering in a forest to discuss the future of Mauryavansh. A bleak vision of a bleak future.

Rising unsteadily on bony limbs, he staggered slowly to the entrance of the hut and outside, to the tamped mud flat clearing before the hut. The

familiar odour of freshly applied dried cow dung and cow urine lingered, discernible even above the jungle smells. With a start he realized that if his acolyte had already cleaned and disinfected the clearing, that meant the hour of bhor suvah was nigh. He looked up at the eastern sky. It was black as the hair on his head had once been, black as the jungle pressing in around him on all sides. He could not tell the hour, or even the watch, which was unusual for him. He had always known exactly what watch and hour it was, even when waking from the deepest sleep, and exactly where he was in relation to true north. It was the result of his father's conditioning, from Kautilya's birth; his father, who had also been his first and only guru.

Be aware at all times, Kautilya, even when asleep.

Today, his father's conditioning had finally failed him. He was disoriented and confused, his brain still struggling, his breath still wheezing in his chest. He was in his own hut in his own ashram, but had someone burst in and told him that he was on the peak of Kailasa right now, he would not have been surprised.

Or in the depths of Naraka, he thought sourly. Then, in an uncharacteristic pique, he permitted himself to mentally voice a plaint: Mahadeva, you are the giver of all gifts, for that we are eternally grateful, but this gift of old age you can take and stuff it into a tree trunk, thank you. Declined with gratitude.

He sat and watched as the eastern sky began to lighten faintly by slow degrees. He ought to get moving, to perform his morning rituals, meditate, and prepare for another day of lessons to his acolytes, and the composition of his seemingly unending treatise. But for once, his limbs would not move, his brain could not bring itself to command them into action, and he just sat there and watched the crow-black sky turn the colour of a heron's wing.

The dream. It meant something. A dream of lions could not be without significance. Who was the Bharata the old cat spoke of? It could not be Chandragupta Maurya, could it? He was long gone to the great cat-house in the sky. Then who? Surely not Bindusara. Since he turned Ajvika, he had foresworn violence personally. He only commanded the commission of violence, he did not stain his own sword. Besides, he was more likely to be eaten alive by a pride of cubs than kill a lion himself.

Who else then?

The sons of Bindusara?

Among their number, there was only one who could achieve such a feat. Kautilya mused on the matter for a long time, till the sky turned bright

blue and the sunlight found its way between the high trees into the clearing. Finally, he roused himself and strode back towards the hut. There was new purpose and strength in his movements. Perhaps strength was too strong a word; it was more about determination. He emerged from the hut moments later, carrying his staff, the one with the top meticulously carved in the shape of a lion's head by a gifted shudra artist. The end of the staff left clear indentations in the soft dung-coated floor of the clearing.

When his students came for the morning lesson, they found only these marks to indicate that he had gone.

The marks were headed in the direction of Pataliputra, capitol city of the Mauryavansh empire.

Ashoka woke as easily as any cat. No thrashing in sleep, no cold sweats, no calling out. He had learned from childhood that for a warrior, rest was a precious jewel: Steal it every chance you get. The more you get, the richer you are in health. So he slept in patches, a wink here, forty there, a few hundred some nights if he could afford it. But even in the deepest slumber in the cold dark watches of a winter night, he was ever just a blink away from wakefulness.

He blinked. And blinked again.

And saw nothing but fur.

He grinned in the darkness, moved his head a fraction, and was able to see the mud floor, walls and thatched roof of the ashram hut. The bundle of fur that had obscured his view continued to lay as it had, positioned in front of his face. As Ashoka raised himself to one elbow, the bundle stirred, raised its oversized head, and licked his face with a lavish slurping stroke. Ashoka grinned again and wiped the saliva off. It still smelled of the cow's milk he had fed the cub before bedding down beside her only a few hours earlier.

'Glad to see you're feeling better,' he said, rising to his feet. The cub tried to emulate him, but her solitary hind leg shook and her flanks shivered. Ashoka watched, knowing better than to help. The cub whimpered as the injury on her remaining hind leg caused her pain, but she bravely completed the action and stood on her own three feet. Ashoka did not regret severing the pitifully injured leg at the topmost joint—it had been too far gone to save and had the wound festered, it would have killed the animal for sure. He had chosen to save the creature's life by cutting off the useless limb and tending for the beast until she was strong enough to hunt on her own.

As he went to the entrance of the hut, glancing out with his usual caution, he considered that decision. The cub would walk again, he was

certain of that from the way she had already adapted to her new three-legged gait. But would she be able to hunt? How could she, when her mother had died too young to be able to teach her? Vyag usually taught their young to hunt from the age of three masas onwards—three moon-cycles being the time it took for a young cub to be able to crouch and stalk without tumbling over its own tail—but it took a cub another eight or nine masas more of constant imitation before she could actually hunt prey herself, under matriarchal supervision. He had seen the process first-hand twice in his young life, and it never ceased to inspire him. He had learned his own hunting skills by studying Vyag, supervised by his guru, and that had made him identify intimately with these proud, beautiful creatures.

Even now, watching the three-legged cub shake off her pain and stand at a cautious angle to him, he admired her courage. She sensed him looking at her and yawned to feign disinterest, which he knew was the Vyag way. The moment he stepped out of the hut into the cool winter air, she pattered after him, afraid of being left behind.

He smiled and feigned disinterest too by taking long strides that must have seemed like enormous leaps to her, conceding to her condition by stepping with exaggerated slowness. He needed to challenge her just enough to help her fight her way back to full mobility. Mollycoddling would be dangerous. He had known that she would be extra effort from the moment he had seen the smashed bloody mess that was her right hind leg, and her chances of surviving were nil without him, and slim even with his help. But he intended to do his best, which meant challenging her to do her best.

The act of sleeping head to head with him in the night was her way of showing she trusted and needed him, of saying, 'We are pack'. It had touched him more than he cared to admit and he slowed a tad when he heard her labouring to keep up even with his reduced pace.

You can't be a mother to a Vyag, Ashoka. This is a foolish enterprise, as Guruji would have said. Bonding with you this way will make it impossible for her to reintegrate with her own kind. And your life is no life for a three-legged Vyag cub!

But he had no choice. He couldn't bring himself to leave the injured cub lying there in its own blood and faeces, mewling pitifully. He just couldn't.

Because he had just killed her mother.

'Come on then,' he said, moving just a little quicker, forcing the three-legged orphan to hop twice as fast. The earnestness with which it kept up was heartbreakingly admirable.

A moment later, they came upon the clearing where his fighters waited. Ashoka slowed, and the cub reduced its brave pace with a whimper of relief. She smelled the horses and the men and snarled reflexively, cringing as she saw what must have looked like a small army to her. But she didn't turn tail and run. Instead, she moved closer to Ashoka and braced her forepaws in a fighting stance, growling at them. We are pack, the two-legged one and I, we stand together and fight together. Ashoka smiled at her show of loyalty. Barely a week and already she was ready to fight beside him. But then, that was Vyag loyalty. Humans on the other hand ...

'The Yuvraj?' Ashoka asked, acknowledging his best man Dwadesh.

Dwadesh jerked his head in the direction of Pataliputra. 'With the rest of our band, on the crossroads, waiting.' He emphasized the last word with a look.

Ashoka chuckled. He could imagine how well his brother the crown prince Yuvraj Sushim was taking the waiting. Ashoka had spent the last few days and nights at the ashram instead of at the royal palace in his official apartments. He had wanted to keep the injured cub away from the cruel pranks of his brother princes but he also preferred the simple rustic existence of the ashram routine to the debauched hedonism of the princes' palace.

He scooped up the little cub, turning it in a moment from a growling predator to a surprised kitten. He swung up on his mount, carefully placing the cub on the leather saddle where its claws promptly dug in, anchoring it. A gentle stroke to reassure it, then he nodded at Dwadesh who turned the head of his own horse, leading the group through the woods back to the crossroads. They would join the main contingent and start the long journey to Taxila, where Yuvraj Sushim was to negotiate the release of the city from the Pakhtun rebels who had overrun it. Ashoka and his fighting band were the bodyguards to the prince and the only military, or militia, present on the trip. The idea was that sending a large, official-looking Mauryan army presence would provoke further aggression from the rebels. Ashoka's scruffy-looking band was easily underestimated, though he knew that each one of them were worth ten of the average Mauryan soldiers.

As they rode, and the little cub stopped whining about this unorthodox means of Vyag transport, it occurred to Ashoka that he had finally found the name he had been seeking for his loyal band.

'Cubs,' he said aloud, testing the word.

'What's that?' Dwadesh asked, glancing back.

'We'll call ourselves Cubs from now on,' Ashoka said. He indicated the

little three-legged creature dug into his saddle top. 'Even have our own mascot!'

Dwadesh grinned, glancing around at the others. They all nodded, grinning or grimacing in approval. 'Ashoka's Cubs,' Dwadesh said. 'I like the sound of that.'

The little Vyag purred unexpectedly. She was starting to enjoy the ride, especially after she had realized she was safe and that her newfound pack leader was right with her.

'She likes it too,' Ashoka said. 'Cubs it is then.'

War Marshall Khorasan watched from the cover of the high thicket as Prince Sushim and Prince Ashoka's expedition force wound its way through the valley below. The Khorasani guard ranged behind the war marshall watched as well with their customary arrogant indifference. If they were ordered to attack the expedition now they would do so without question. Friend or foe, family or unknown, it was all the same to a Khorasani. Steel knew no blood kin, the blade had no friends. They would swoop down on the very princes they were assigned to protect, and kill, slaughter, torture, rape, or do whatever they were told to do to them, and at the end of watch, they would stand down, take their repast and retire and never dwell on the why or wherefore of what they had done. They were Khorasani, they did not waste time on thinking. Thinking was for poets and there were no Khorasani poets, not the kind that used words anyway. The song of steel was the only music they understood, and it consisted of a single lyric: Kill.

The war marshall of Mauryavansh watched until the Taxila expedition reached the end of the valley road and wound its way around the bluff, disappearing out of sight. Even now, they could easily be caught up with, easily ambushed, stalked or trapped. It was a long way to Taxila and much could happen between here and there. No help would come from Magadha—they were the royal guard, dispatched to escort the expedition safely to the border.

Khorasan itched to do it, to fall upon the two princes and cut them open like bleating lambs. She had done it before, though not so blatantly. Each prince eliminated meant one less future rival to the throne. And these two, Sushim and Ashoka, were the two eldest, the first and second claimants by law. Sushim was crown prince and Ashoka was second in succession, although there was some debate about who was the older one. It did not matter that Ashoka made no claim to the throne and was apparently content to be his brother's protector and guardian, even riding alongside him on this Taxila expedition like a common bodyguard. Khorasan neither

believed such brotherly altruism nor trusted it. All flesh craved power. Just as all steel craved blood. It was the natural order of things. Sushim she did not even count as a rival. The crown prince was a competent fighter if he stayed sober long enough to know the pointy end of a sword, but he was spoiled and weakened by self-indulgences. Eliminating him would be as easy as cutting a billy goat's throat.

Ashoka was another matter. Though the boy made no claim to his inheritance, seemingly content to live out his youthful existence serving rather than ruling, he was a canny young man. A shrewd tactician. A promising fighter. A disciplined pupil of warcraft. And from what Khorasan had seen, a leader of men. His ragtag group of warriors, rough and only slightly experienced in battle, could be licked into fighting shape over time. Today was an example: the fighters had just returned with Ashoka from one skirmish, and here they were, already riding out to Taxila to deal with a bigger challenge. Even she grudgingly acknowledged that such dedication was rare among the sons of Bindusara—or among the Mauryans in general. Khorasan had observed the young prince's dealings with the group as well as with individual warriors, some defiant, feeling their oats, others more vicious and looking to butt heads with any authority; Ashoka had dealt with them impressively well.

He had a flaw of course, a great big one that would eventually prove his undoing: he was soft metal, too easily given to forgiving and nurturing rather than setting right. The Khorasani believed that if a man or woman defied you, you put them down, otherwise the next chance they saw, they would do the same to you. The idea of forgiveness, or mercy, was alien to Khorasani culture. Ashoka's willingness to overlook transgressions was a weakness that would cost him someday. But even with these failings, he was still one to watch. If Khorasan had been the one giving the order, Ashoka and his ragtag group of warriors would already be a pile of steaming entrails strewn across the king's road down in the valley. A flare was best extinguished before it became a blaze.

But her orders had been simple and clear: watch and report.

The princes would find a challenge up in Taxila. They were unlikely to survive that. If they did survive, they would face a bigger threat later on. That was the plan. It was a good one. Her daughter Rani Khorasan was the political strategist and she, War Marshall Khorasan, the tactician. The fist and the blade, each needing the other, both accepting their respective parts in this great game. Her age-lined face creased in a hard expression that was nothing like a smile and yet was as close to smiling as her war-seared face could ever affect. It was the expression of a wolf that had selected its prey

but had delayed the kill until a better opportunity presented itself.

The war marshall turned the head of her horse and began riding back towards Magadha. Her warriors needed no verbal orders or instructions to follow. The Khorasani way was to lead by action and example, not words.

She was looking forward to the day, not long now, when these tactics and strategies would be done and she could unleash her wolves upon all enemies, present or potential. That day was coming.

She would bide her time until then. And when it came, Prince Ashoka would be the first one to hear the song of her blade, and it would be the last thing he ever heard.

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